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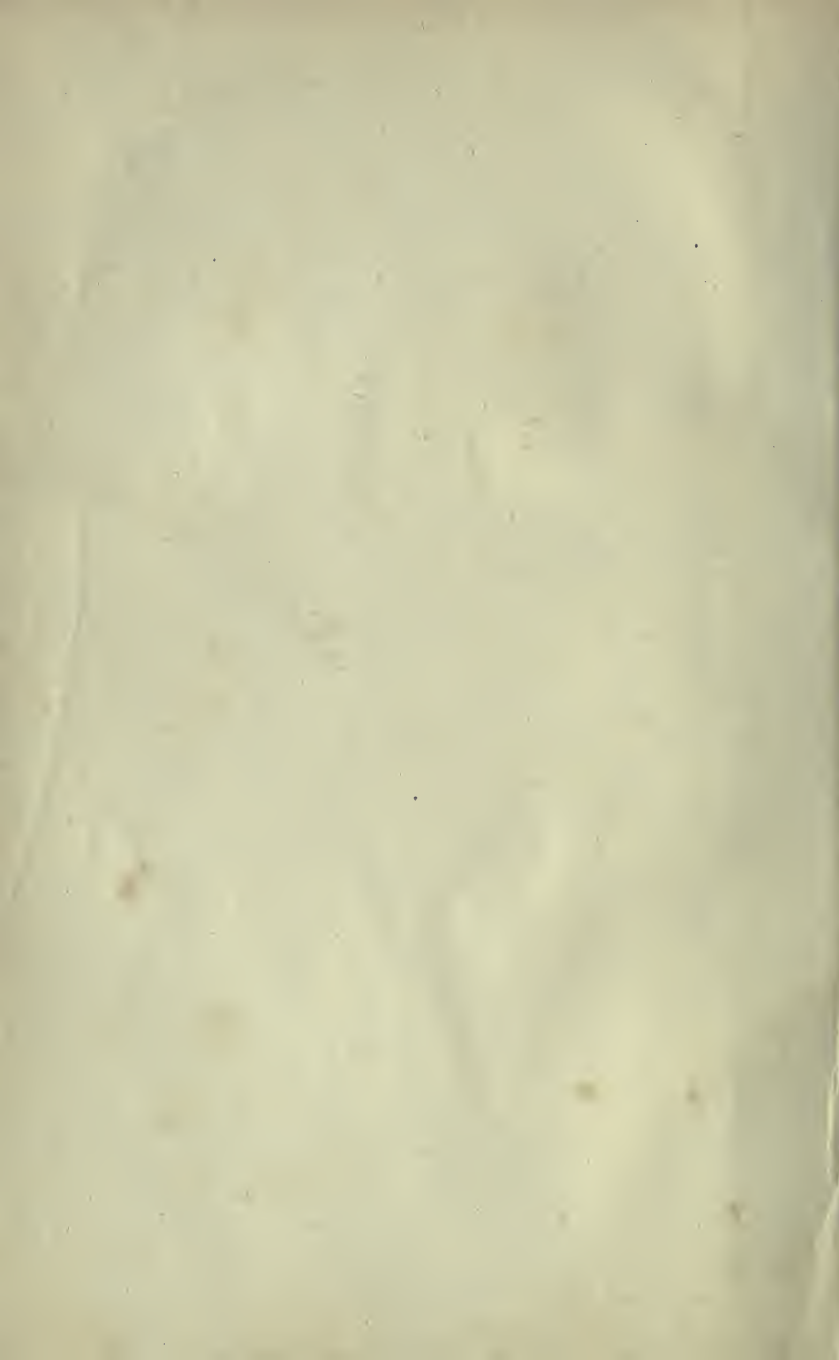


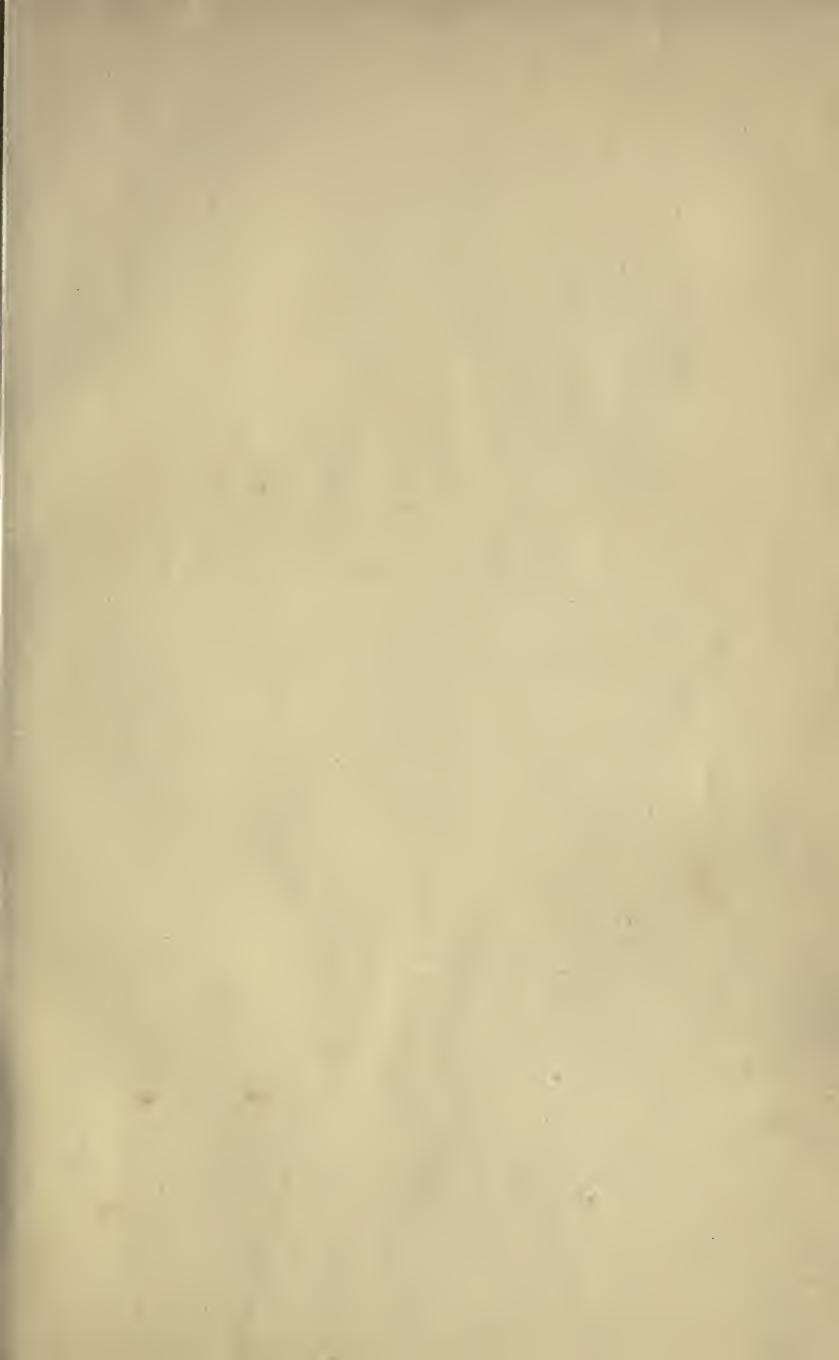
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HODGE AND HIS MASTERS

VOL. II.



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HODGE AND HIS MASTERS

BY

RICHARD JEFFERIES

AUTHOR OF

'THE GAMEKEEPER AT HOME' 'WILD LIFE IN A SOUTHERN COUNTY'
'THE AMATEUR POACHER' 'GREENE FERNE FARM'

IN TWO VOLUMES

VOL. II.

LONDON

SMITH, ELDER, & CO., 15 WATERLOO PLACE

1880

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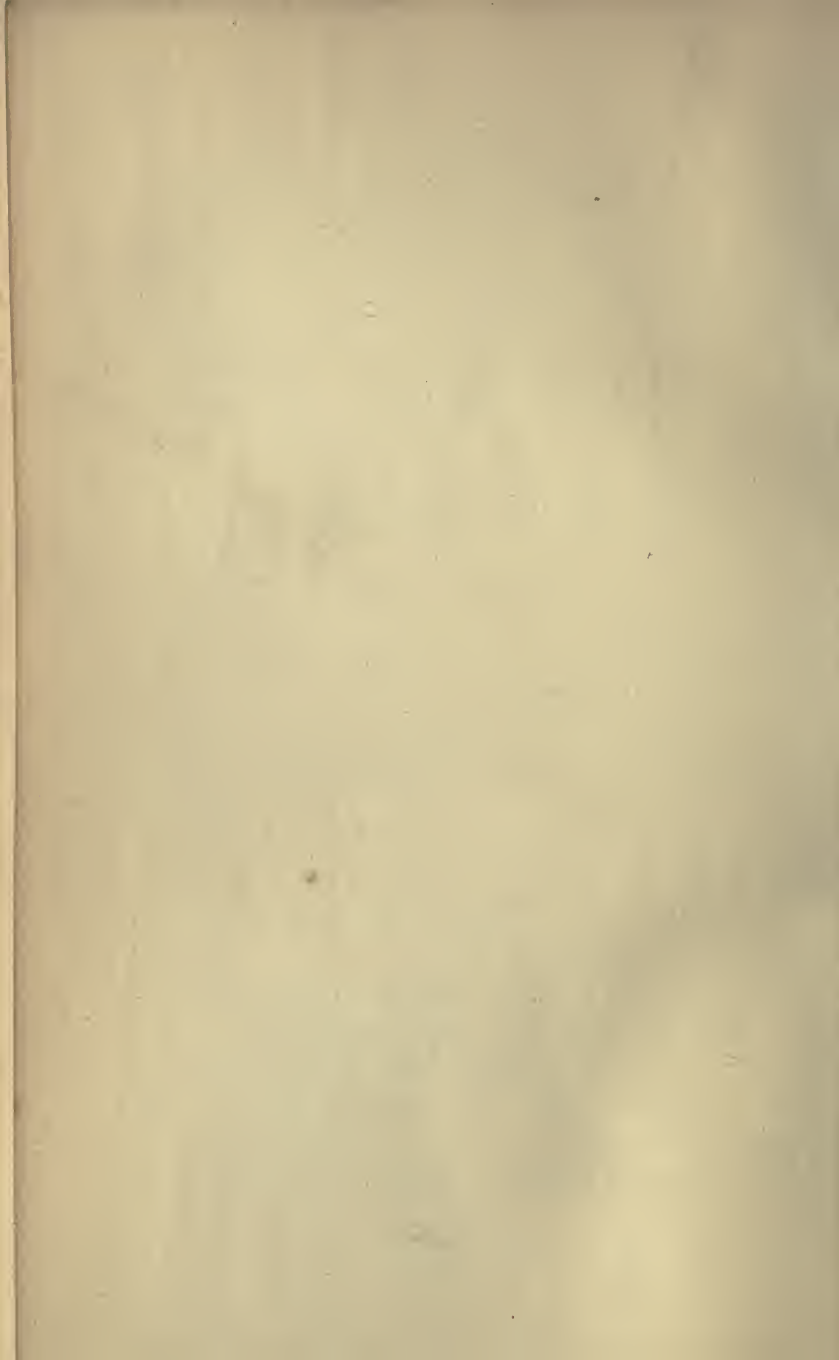
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HODGE AND HIS MASTERS.

CHAPTER I.

THE SOLICITOR.

IN glancing along the street of a country town, a house may sometimes be observed of a different and superior description to the general row of buildings. It is larger, rises higher, and altogether occupies more space. The façade is stylish, in the architectural fashion of half a century since. To the modern eye it may not perhaps look so interesting as the true old gabled roofs which seem so thoroughly English, nor, on the other hand, so bright and cheerful as the modern suburban villa. But it is substantial, and roomy within. The weather has given the front a sombre hue, and the windows are

dingy, as if they rarely or never knew the care of a housemaid. On the ground floor the windows that would otherwise look on to the street are blocked to almost half their height with a wire blind so closely woven that no one can see in, and it is not easy to see out. The doorway is large, with stone steps and porch—the doorway of a gentleman's house. There is business close at hand—shops and inns, and all the usual offices of a town—but, though in the midst, this house wears an air of separation from the rest of the street.

When it was built—say fifty years ago, or more—it was, in fact, the dwelling-house of an independent gentleman. Similar houses may be found in other parts of the place, once inhabited by retired and wealthy people. Such persons no longer live in towns of this kind—they build villas with lawns and pleasure grounds outside in the environs, or, though still retaining their pecuniary interest, reside at a distance. Like large cities, country towns are now almost given over to offices, shops, workshops, and hotels. Those who have made money get away from the streets as quickly as possible. Upon approaching nearer to this

particular building the street door will be found to be wide open to the public, and, if you venture still closer, a name may be seen painted in black letters upon the side of the passage wall, after the manner of the brokers in the courts off Throgmorton Street, or of the lawyers in the Temple. It is, in fact, the office of a country solicitor—most emphatically one of Hodge's many masters—and is admirably suited for his purpose, on account of its roomy interior.

The first door within opens on the clerks' room, and should you modestly knock on the panels instead of at once turning the handle, a voice will invite you to 'Come in.' Half of the room is partitioned off for the clerks, who sit at a long high desk, with a low railing or screen in front of them. Before the senior is a brass rail, along which he can, if he chooses, draw a red curtain. He is too hard at work and intent upon some manuscript to so much as raise his head as you enter. But the two younger men, eager for a change, look over the screen, and very civilly offer to attend to your business. When you have said that you wish to see the head of the firm, you naturally

imagine that your name will be at once shouted up the tube, and that in a minute or two, at farthest, you will be ushered into the presence of the principal. In that small country town there cannot surely be much work for a lawyer, and a visitor must be quite an event. Instead, however, of using the tube they turn to the elder clerk, and a whispered conversation takes place, of which some broken sentences may be caught—‘He can’t be disturbed,’ ‘It’s no use,’ ‘Must wait.’ Then the elder clerk looks over his brass rail and says he is very sorry, but the principal is engaged, the directors of a company are with him, and it is quite impossible to say exactly when they will leave. It may be ten minutes, or an hour. But if you like to wait (pointing with his quill to a chair) your name shall be sent up directly the directors leave.

You glance at the clock, and elect to wait. The elder clerk nods his head, and instantly resumes his writing. The chair is old and hard—the stuffing compressed by a generation of weary suitors ; there are two others at equal distances along the wall. The only other furniture is a small but solid table, upon

which stands a brass copying-press. On the mantelpiece there are scales for letter-weighing, paper clips full of papers, a county Post-office directory, a railway time-table card nailed to the wall, and a box of paper fasteners. Over it is a map, dusty and dingy, of some estate laid out for building purposes, with a winding stream running through it, roads crossing at right angles, and the points of the compass indicated in an upper corner.

On the other side of the room, by the window, a framed advertisement hangs against the wall, like a picture, setting forth the capital and reserve and the various advantages offered by an insurance company, for which the firm are the local agents. Between the chairs are two boards fixed to the wall with some kind of hook or nail for the suspension of posters and printed bills. These boards are covered with such posters, announcing sales by auction, farms to be let, houses to be had on lease, shares in a local bank or gas works for sale, and so on, for all of which properties the firm are the legal representatives. Though the room is of fair size the ceiling is low, as is often the case in old houses, and it has, in

consequence, become darkened by smoke and dust, thereby, after a while, giving a gloomy, oppressive feeling to any one who has little else to gaze at. The blind at the window rises far too high to allow of looking out, and the ground glass above it was designed to prevent the clerks from wasting their time watching the passers-by in the street. There is, however, one place where the glass is worn and transparent, and every now and then one of the two younger clerks mounts on his stool and takes a peep through to report to his companion.

The restraint arising from the presence of a stranger soon wears off; the whisper rises to a buzz of talk; they laugh, and pelt each other with pellets of paper. The older clerk takes not the least heed. He writes steadily on, and never lifts his head from the paper—long hours of labour have dimmed his sight, and he has to stoop close over the folio. He may be preparing a brief, he may be copying a deposition, or perhaps making a copy of a deed; but whatever it is, his whole mind is absorbed and concentrated on his pen. There must be no blot, no erasure, no interlineation.

The hand of the clock moves slowly, and the half-heard talk and jests of the junior clerks—one of whom you suspect of making a pen and ink sketch of you—mingle with the ceaseless scrape of the senior's pen, and the low buzz of two black flies that circle for ever round and round just beneath the grimy ceiling. Occasionally noises of the street penetrate; the rumble of loaded waggons, the tramp of nailed shoes, or the sharp quick sound of a trotting horse's hoofs. Then the junior jumps up and gazes through the peephole. The directors are a very long time upstairs. What can their business be? Why are there directors at all in little country towns?

Presently there are heavy footsteps in the passage, the door slowly opens, and an elderly labourer, hat in hand, peers in. No one takes the least notice of him. He leans on his stick and blinks his eyes, looking all round the room; then taps with the stick and clears his throat—'Be he in yet?' he asks, with emphasis on the 'he.' 'No, he be not in,' replies a junior, mocking the old man's accent and grammar. The senior looks up, 'Call at two o'clock, the deed is not ready,' and down goes his head

again. 'A' main bit o' bother about this yer margidge' (mortgage), the labourer remarks, as he turns to go out, not without a complacent smile on his features, for the law's delays seem to him grand, and he feels important. He has a little property—a cottage and garden—upon which he is raising a small sum for some purpose, and this 'margidge' is one of the great events of his life. He talked about it for two or three years before he ventured to begin it; he has been weeks making up his mind exactly what to do after his first interview with the solicitor—he would have been months had not the solicitor at last made it plain that he could waste no more time—and when it is finally completed he will talk about it again till the end of his days. He will be in and out asking for 'he' all day long at intervals, and when the interview takes place it will be only for the purpose of having everything already settled explained over to him for the fiftieth time. His heavy shoes drag slowly down the passage—he will go to the street corner and talk with the carters who come in, and the old women, with their baskets, a-shopping, about 'this yer law job.'

There is a swifter step on the lead-covered staircase, and a clerk appears, coming from the upper rooms. He has a telegram and a letter in one hand, and a bundle of papers in the other. He shows the telegram and the letter to his fellow clerks—even the grave senior just glances at the contents silently, elevates his eyebrows, and returns to his work. After a few minutes' talk and a jest or two the clerk rushes upstairs again.

Another caller comes. It is a stout, florid man, a young farmer or farmer's son, riding-whip in hand, who produces a red-bound rate-book from a pocket in his coat made on purpose to hold the unwieldy volume. He is a rate-collector for his parish, and has called about some technicalities. The grave senior clerk examines the book, but cannot solve the difficulties pointed out by the collector, and, placing it on one side, recommends the inquirer to call in two hours' time. Steps again on the stairs, and another clerk comes down leisurely, and after him still another. Their only business is to exchange a few words with their friends, for pastime, and they go up again.

As the morning draws on, the callers become more numerous, and it is easy to tell the positions they occupy by the degree of attention they receive from the clerks. A tradesman calls three or four times, with short intervals between—he runs over from his shop; the two juniors do not trouble to so much as look over the screen, and barely take the trouble to answer the anxious inquiry if the principal is yet disengaged. They know, perhaps, too much about his bills and the state of his credit. A builder looks in—the juniors are tolerably civil, and explain to him that it is no use calling for yet another hour at least. The builder consults his watch, and decides to see the chief clerk (who is himself an attorney, having passed the examination), and is forthwith conducted upstairs. A burly farmer appears, and the grave senior puts his head up to answer, and expresses his sorrow that the principal is so occupied. The burly farmer, however, who is evidently a man of substance, thinks that the chief clerk can also do what he wants, and he, too, is ushered upstairs. Another farmer enters—a rather rougher-looking man—and, without saying a

word, turns to the advertisement boards on which the posters of farms to be let, &c., are displayed. These he examines with the greatest care, pointing with his forefinger as he slowly reads, and muttering to himself. Presently he moves to go. 'Anything to suit you, sir?' asks the senior clerk. 'Aw, no; I knows they be too much money,' he replies, and walks out.

A gentleman next enters, and immediately the juniors sink out of sight, and scribble away with eager application; the senior puts down his pen and comes out from his desk. It is a squire and magistrate. The senior respectfully apologises for his employer being so occupied. The gentleman seems a little impatient. The clerk rubs his hands together deprecatingly, and makes a desperate venture. He goes upstairs, and in a few minutes returns; the papers are not ready, but shall be sent over that evening in any case. With this even the squire must fain be satisfied and depart. The burly farmer and the builder come downstairs together amicably chatting, and after them the chief clerk himself. Though young, he has already an expression of deci-

sion upon his features, an air of business about him ; in fact, were he not thoroughly up to his work he would not remain in that office long. To hold that place is a guarantee of ability. He has a bundle of cheques, drafts, &c., in his hand, and after a few words with the grave senior at the desk, strolls across to the bank.

No sooner has the door closed behind him than a shoal of clerks come tripping down on tip-toe, and others appear from the back of the house. They make use of the opportunity for a little gossip. Voices are heard in the passage, and an aged and infirm labouring man is helped in by a woman and a younger man. The clerks take no notice, and the poor old fellow props himself against the wall, not daring to take a chair. He is a witness. He can neither read nor write, but he can recollect 'thuck ould tree,' and can depose to a fact worth perhaps hundreds of pounds. He has come in to be examined ; he will be driven in a week or two's time from the village to the railway station in a fly, and will talk about it and his visit to London till the lamp of life dies out.

A footman calls with a note, a groom brings another, the letters are carelessly cast aside, till one of the juniors, who has been watching from the peephole, reports that the chief clerk is coming, and everybody scuttles back to his place. Callers come still more thickly; another solicitor, well-to-do, and treated with the utmost deference; more tradesmen; farmers; two or three auctioneers, in quick succession; the well-brushed editor of a local paper; a second attorney, none too well dressed, with scrubby chin and face suspiciously cloudy, with an odour of spirits and water and tobacco clinging to his rusty coat. He belongs to a disappearing type of country lawyer, and is the wreck, perhaps, of high hopes and good opportunities. Yet, wreck as he is, when he gets up at the Petty Sessions to defend some labourer, the bench of magistrates listen to his maundering argument as deferentially as if he were a Q.C. They pity him, and they respect his cloth. The scrubby attorney whistles a tune, and utters an oath when he learns the principal is engaged. Then he marches out, with his hat on one side of his head, to take another 'refresher.'

Two telegrams arrive, and are thrown aside; then a gentleman appears, whom the senior goes out to meet with an air of deference, and whom he actually conducts himself upstairs to the principal's room. It is a local banker, who is thus admitted to the directors' consultation. The slow hand of the clock goes round, and, sitting wearily on the hard chair, you wonder if ever it will be possible to see this much-sought man. By-and-by a door opens above, there is a great sound of voices and chatting, and half-a-dozen gentlemen—mostly landed proprietors from their appearance—come downstairs. They are the directors, and the consultation is over. The senior clerk immediately goes to the principal, and shortly afterwards reappears and asks you to come up.

As you mount the lead-covered stairs you glance down and observe the anxious tradesman, the ancient labourer, and several others who have crowded in, all eyeing you with jealous glances. But the senior is holding the door open—you enter, and it closes noiselessly behind you. A hand with a pen in it points to a chair, with a muttered 'Pardon—half a

moment,' and while the solicitor just jots down his notes you can glance round the apartment. Shelves of calf-bound law books; piles of japanned deed-boxes, some marked in white letters 'Trustees of,' or 'Executors of,' and pigeon-holes full of papers seem to quite hide the walls. The floor is covered with some material noiseless to walk on (the door, too, is double, to exclude noise and draught); the furniture is solid and valuable; the armchair you occupy capacious and luxurious. On the wall hangs a section of the Ordnance map of the district. But the large table, which almost fills the centre of the room, quickly draws the attention from everything else.

It is on that table that all the business is done; all the energies of the place are controlled and directed from thence. At the first glance it appears to support a mere chaotic mass of papers. They completely conceal it, except just at the edge. Bundles of letters tied with thin red tape, letters loose, letters unopened; parchment deeds with the seals and signature just visible; deeds with the top and the words, 'This indenture,' alone showing out from the confusion; deeds neatly folded;

broad manuscript briefs ; papers fastened with brass fasteners ; papers hastily pinned together ; old newspapers marked and underlined in red ink ; a large sectional map, half unrolled and hanging over the edge ; a small deed-box, the lid open, and full of blue paper in oblong strips ; a tall porcupine-quill pen handle sticking up like a spire ; pocket-books ; books open ; books with half-a-dozen papers in them for markers ; altogether an utter chaos. But the confusion is only apparent ; the master mind knows the exact position of every document, and can lay his hand on it the moment it is wanted.

The business is such that even that master mind can barely keep pace with it. This great house can hardly contain it ; all the clerks we saw rushing about cannot get through the work, and much of the mechanical copying or engrossing goes to London to be done. The entire round of country life comes here. The rolling hills where the shepherd watches his flock, the broad plains where the ploughman guides the share, the pleasant meadows where the roan cattle chew the cud, the extensive parks, the shady woods,

sweet streams, and hedges overgrown with honeysuckle, all have their written counterpart in those japanned deed boxes. Solid as is the land over which Hodge walks stolid and slow, these mere written words on parchment are the masters of it all. The squire comes here about intricate concerns of family settlements which in their sphere are as hard to arrange as the diplomatic transactions of Governments. He comes about his tenants and his rent; he comes to get new tenants.

The tenants resort to the solicitor for farms, for improvements, reductions, leases, to negotiate advances, to insure, for the various affairs of life. The clergyman comes on questions that arise out of his benefice, the churchyard, ecclesiastical privileges, the schools, and about his own private property. The labourer comes about his cottage and garden—an estate as important to him as his three thousand acres to the squire—or as a witness. The tradesman, the builder, the banker come for financial as well as legal objects. As the town develops, and plots are needed for houses and streets, the resort to the solicitor increases tenfold.

Companies are formed and require his advice. Local government needs his assistance. He may sit in an official position in the County Court, or at the bench of the Petty Sessions. Law suits—locally great—are carried through in the upper courts of the metropolis; the counsel's name appears in the papers, but it is the country solicitor who has prepared everything for him, and who has marshalled that regiment of witnesses from remote hamlets of the earth. His widening circle of landlord clients have each their attendant circles of tenants, who feel confidence in their leader's legal adviser. Parochial officers come to him; overseer, rate-collector, churchwarden, tithing-man.

The all-important work of registering voters fills up the space between one election and another. At the election his offices are like the head-quarters of an army. He may represent some ancient college, or corporation with lands of vast extent. Ladies with a little capital go home content when he has invested their money in mortgage of real property. Still the work goes on increasing; additional clerks have to be employed; a fresh wing has

to be built to the old house. He has, too, his social duties; he is, perhaps, the head or mainspring of a church movement—this is not for profit, but from conviction. His lady is carried to and fro in the brougham, making social visits. He promotes athletic clubs, reading-rooms, shows, exhibitions. He is eagerly seized upon by promoters of all kinds, because he possesses the gift of organisation. It becomes a labour merely to catalogue his engagements like this. Let the rain rain, or the sun shine, the pen never stays work.

Personally he is the very antithesis of what might be predicated of the slow, comfortable, old-fashioned lawyer. He is in the prime of life, physically full of vigour, mentally persevering with untiring perseverance, the embodiment of energy, ever anxious to act, to do rather than to delay. As you talk with him you find his leading idea seems to be to arrange your own half-formed views for you; in short, to show you what you really do want, to put your desire into shape. He interprets you. Many of the clients who come to him are the most impracticable men

in the world. A farmer, for instance, with a little money, is in search of a farm. Find him twenty farms just the size for his capital, he will visit them all and discover a fault in each, and waver and waver till the proper season for entering on possession is past. The great problem with country people is how to bring them to the point. You may think you have got all your witnesses ready for the train for London, and, as the bell rings, find that one has slipped away half-a-mile to talk with the blacksmith about the shoeing of his mare. Even the squire is trying when he talks of this or that settlement. Of course, as he is educated, no lengthy and oft-repeated explanations are needed ; but the squire forgets that time is valuable, and lingers merely to chat. He has so much time to spare, he is apt to overlook that the solicitor has none. The clergyman will talk, talk, talk in rounded periods, and nothing will stop him ; very often he drives his wife in with him from the village, and the wife must have her say. As for Hodge and his mortgage, ten years would not suffice for his business were he allowed to wander on. The problem is to

bring these impracticable people to the point with perfect courtesy. As you talk with him yourself, you feel tempted to prolong the interview—so lucid an intellect exercises an indefinable charm.

Keen and shrewd as he is, the solicitor has a kindly reputation. Men say that he is slow to press them, that he makes allowances for circumstances ; that if the tenant is honestly willing to discharge his obligation he need fear no arbitrary selling up. But he is equally reputed swift of punishment upon those who would take shelter behind mere shallow pretence, or attempt downright deceit. Let a man only be straightforward, and the solicitor will wait rather than put the law in force. Therefore, he is popular, and people have faith in him. But the labour, the incessant supervision, the jotting down of notes, the ceaseless interviews, the arguments, the correspondence, the work that is never finished when night comes, tell even upon that physical vigour and mental elasticity. Hodge sleeps sound and sees the days go by with calm complacency. The man who holds that solid earth, as it were, in the japanned boxes finds a nervous feeling

growing upon him despite his strength of will. Presently nature will have her way; and, weary and hungry for fresh air, he rushes off for a while to distant trout-stream, moor, or stubble.

CHAPTER II.

‘COUNTY-COURT DAY.’

THE monthly sitting of the County Court in a country market town is an event of much interest in all the villages around, so many of the causes concerning agricultural people. ‘County-Court Day’ is looked upon as a date in the calendar by which to recollect when a thing happened, or to arrange for the future.

As the visitor enters the doorway of the Court, at a distance the scene appears imposing. Brass railings and red curtains partition off about a third of the hall, and immediately in the rear of this the Judge sits high above the rest on a raised and carpeted dais. The elevation and isolation of the central figure adds a solemn dignity to his office. His features set, as it were, in the wig, stand out in sharp relief—they are of

a keenly intellectual cast, and have something of the precise clearness of an antique cameo. The expression is that of a mind in continuous exercise—of a mind accustomed not to slow but to quick deliberation, and to instant decision. The definition of the face gives the eyes the aspect of penetration, as if they saw at once beneath the surface of things.

If the visitor looks only at the Judge he will realise the dignity of the law ; the law which is the outcome and result of so many centuries of thought. But if he glances aside from the central figure the impression is weakened by the miserable, hollow, and dingy framing. The carpet upon the daïs and the red curtains before it ill conceal the paltry substructure. It is composed of several large tables, heavy and shapeless as benches, placed side by side to form a platform. The curtains are dingy and threadbare ; the walls dingy, the ceiling, though lofty, dingy ; the boxes on either side for Plaintiff and Defendant are scratched and defaced by the innumerable witnesses who have blundered into them, kicking their shoes against the

woodwork. The entire apparatus is movable, and can be taken to pieces in ten minutes, or part of it employed for meetings of any description. There is nothing appropriate or convenient ; it is a makeshift, and altogether unequal to the pretensions of a Court now perhaps the most useful and most resorted to of any that sit in the country.

Quarter sessions and assizes come only at long intervals, are held only in particular time-honoured places, and take cognisance only of very serious offences which happily are not numerous. The County Court at the present day has had its jurisdiction so enlarged that it is really, in country districts, the leading tribunal, and the one best adapted to modern wants, because its procedure is to a great extent free from obsolete forms and technicalities. The Plaintiff and the Defendant literally face their Judge, practically converse with him, and can tell their story in their own simple and natural way. It is a fact that the importance and usefulness of the country County Court has in most places far outgrown the arrangements made for it. The Judges may with reason complain that while

their duties have been enormously added to, their convenience has not been equally studied, nor their salaries correspondingly increased.

In front, and below the Judge's desk, just outside the red curtain, is a long and broad table, at which the High Bailiff sits facing the hall. By his side the Registrar's clerk from time to time makes notes in a ponderous volume which contains a minute and exact record of every claim. Opposite, and at each end, the lawyers have their chairs and strew the table with their papers.

As a rule a higher class of lawyers appear in the County Court than before the Petty Sessional Bench. A local solicitor of ability no sooner gets a 'conveyancing' practice than he finds his time too valuable to be spent arguing in cases of assault or petty larceny. He ceases to attend the Petty Sessions, unless his private clients are interested or some exceptional circumstances induce him. In the County Court cases often arise which concern property, houses and lands, and the fulfilment of contracts. Some of the very best lawyers of the district may consequently be seen at that

table, and frequently a barrister or two of standing specially retained is among them.

A low wooden partition, crossing the entire width of the hall, separates the 'bar' from the general public, Plaintiff and Defendant being admitted through a gangway. As the hall is not carpeted, nor covered with any material, a new comer must walk on tip-toe to avoid raising the echo of hollow boards, or run the risk of a reproof from the Judge, anxiously endeavouring to catch the accents of a mumbling witness. Groups of people stand near the windows whispering, and occasionally forgetting, in the eagerness of the argument, that talking is prohibited. The room is already full, but will be crowded when the 'horse case' comes on again. Nothing is of so much interest as a 'horse case.' The issues raised concern almost every countryman, and the parties are generally well known. All the idlers of the town are here, and among them many a rascal who has been through the processes, and comes again to listen and possibly learn a dodge by which to delay the execution of judgment. Some few of the more favoured and respectable persons

have obtained entrance to the space allotted to the solicitors, and have planted themselves in a solid circle round the fire, effectually preventing the heat from benefiting any one else. Another fire, carefully tended by a bailiff, burns in the grate behind the Judge, but, as his seat is so far from it, without adding much to his comfort. A chilly draught sweeps along the floor, and yet at the same time there is a close and somewhat fetid atmosphere at the height at which men breathe. The place is ill warmed and worse ventilated; altogether without convenience, and comfortless.

To-day the Judge, to suit the convenience of the solicitors engaged in the 'horse case,' who have requested permission to consult in private, has asked for a short defended cause to fill up the interval till they are ready to resume. The High Bailiff calls 'Brown v. Jones,' claim 8s. for goods supplied. No one at first answers, but after several calls a woman in the body of the court comes forward. She is partly deaf, and until nudged by her neighbours did not hear her husband's name. The Plaintiff is a small village dealer

in tobacco, snuff, coarse groceries, candles, and so on. His wife looks after the little shop, and he works with horse and cart, hauling and doing odd jobs for the farmers. Instead of attending himself he has sent his wife to conduct the case. The Defendant is a labourer living in the same village, who, like so many of his class, has got into debt. He, too, has sent his wife to represent him. This is the usual course of the cottagers, and of agricultural people who are better off than cottagers. The men shirk out of difficulties of this kind by going off in the morning early to their work with the parting remark, 'Aw, you'd better see about it; I don't know nothing about such jobs.'

The High Bailiff has no easy task to swear the Plaintiff's representative. First, she takes the book and kisses it before the formula prescribed has been repeated. Then she waits till the sentence is finished and lifts the book with the left hand instead of the right. The Registrar's clerk has to go across to the box and shout an explanation into her ear. 'Tell the truth,' says the old lady, with alacrity; 'why, that's what I be come for.' The Judge

asks her what it is she claims, and she replies that that man, the Registrar's clerk, has got it all written down in his book. She then turns to the Defendant's wife, who stands in the box opposite, and shouts to her, 'You knows you ain't paid it.'

It is in vain that the Judge endeavours to question her, in vain that the High Bailiff tries to calm her, in vain that the clerk lays his hand on her arm—she is bent on telling the defendant a bit of her mind. The Court is perforce compelled to wait till it is over, when the Judge, seeing that talking is of no avail, goes at once to the root of the matter and asks to see her books. A dirty account book, such as may be purchased for threepence, is handed up to him ; the binding is broken, and some of the leaves are loose. It is neither a day-book, a ledger, nor anything else—there is no system whatever, and indeed the Plaintiff admits that she only put down about half of it, and trusted to memory for the rest. Here is a date, and after it some figures, but no articles mentioned, neither tea nor candles. Next come some groceries, and the price, but no one's name, so that it is impossible to tell

who had the goods. Then there are pages with mysterious dots and strokes and half strokes, which ultimately turn out to mean ounces and half ounces of tobacco. These have neither name nor value attached. From end to end nothing is crossed off, so that whether an account be paid or not cannot be ascertained.

While the Judge laboriously examines every page, trying by the light of former experience to arrive at some idea of the meaning, the Defendant's wife takes up her parable. She chatters in return at the Plaintiff, then she addresses the High Bailiff, who orders her to remain quiet, and, finally, turns round and speaks to the crowd. The Judge, absorbed in the attempt to master the account book, does not for the moment notice this, till, as he comes to the conclusion that the book is utterly valueless, he looks up and finds the Defendant with her back turned gesticulating and describing her wrongs to the audience. Even his command of silence is with reluctance obeyed, and she continues to mutter to herself. When order is restored the Judge asks for her defence, when the woman immediately pro-

duces a receipt, purporting to be for this very eight shillings' worth. At the sight of this torn and dirty piece of paper the Plaintiff works herself into a fury, and speaks so fast and so loud (as deaf people will) that no one else can be heard. Till she is made to understand that she will be sent out of Court she does not desist. The Judge looks at the receipt, and finds it correct; but still the Plaintiff positively declares that she has never had the money. Yet she admits that the receipt is in her handwriting. The Judge asks the Defendant who paid over the cash, and she replies that it was her husband. The account-book contains no memorandum of any payment at all. With difficulty the Judge again obtains silence, and once more endeavours to understand a page of the account-book to which the Plaintiff persists in pointing. His idea is now to identify the various articles mentioned in the receipt with the articles put down on that particular page.

After at least three-quarters of an hour, during which the book is handed to and fro by the clerk from Judge to Plaintiff, that she may explain the meaning of the hieroglyphics,

some light at last begins to dawn. By dint of patiently separating the mixed entries the Judge presently arrives at a partial comprehension of what the Plaintiff has been trying to convey. The amount of the receipted bill and the amount of the entries in the page of the account book are the same ; but the articles entered in the book and those admitted to be paid for are not. The receipt mentions candles ; the account book has no candles. Clearly they are two different debts, which chanced to come to the same figure. The receipt, however, is not dated, and whether it is the Defendant who is wilfully misrepresenting, or whether the Plaintiff is under a mistaken notion, the Judge for the time cannot decide. The Defendant declares that she does not know the date and cannot fix it—it was a 'main bit ago,' and that is all she can say.

For the third time the Judge, patient to the last degree, wades through the account book. Meanwhile the hands of the clock have moved on. Instead of being a short case, this apparently simple matter has proved a long one, and already as the afternoon advances the light of the dull winter's day

declines. The solicitors engaged in the horse case, who retired to consult, hoping to come to a settlement, returned into Court fully an hour ago, and have since been sitting at the table waiting to resume. Besides these some four or five other lawyers of equal standing are anxiously looking for a chance of commencing their business. All their clients are waiting, and the witnesses ; they have all crowded into the Court, the close atmosphere of which is almost intolerable.

But having begun the case the Judge gives it his full and undivided attention. Solicitors, clients, witnesses, cases that interest the public, causes that concern valuable property, or important contracts must all be put aside till this trifling matter is settled. He is as anxious as any, or more so, to get on, because delay causes business to accumulate—the adjourned causes, of course, having to be heard at next Court, and thus swelling the list to an inordinate length. But, impatient as he may be, especially as he is convinced that one or other of the parties is keeping back a part of the truth, he is determined that the subject shall be searched to the bottom. The petty

village shopkeeper and the humble cottager obtain as full or fuller attention than the well-to-do Plaintiffs and Defendants who can bring down barristers from London.

‘What have you there?’ the Registrar’s clerk demands of the Plaintiff presently. She has been searching in her pocket for a snuff-box wherewith to refresh herself, and, unable to immediately discover it, has emptied the contents of the pocket on the ledge of the witness-box. Among the rest is another little account book.

‘Let me see that,’ demands the Judge, rather sharply, and no wonder. ‘Why did you not produce it before?’

‘Aw, he be last year’s un; some of it be two years ago,’ is the reply.

Another long pause. The Judge silently examines every page of the account book two years old. Suddenly he looks up. ‘This receipt,’ he says, ‘was given for an account rendered eighteen months ago. Here in this older book are the entries corresponding with it. The present claim is for a second series of articles which happened to come to the same amount, and the Defendant, finding that the

receipt was not dated, has endeavoured to make it do duty for the two.'

'I tould you so,' interrupts the Plaintiff. 'I tould you so, but you wouldn't listen to I.'

The Judge continues that he is not sure he ought not to commit the Defendant, and then, with a gesture of weary disgust, throws down his pen and breaks off in the middle of his sentence to ask the High Bailiff if there are any other judgments out against the Defendant. So many years' experience of the shifts, subterfuges, paltry misrepresentations, and suppressions—all the mean and despicable side of poor humanity—have indeed wearied him, but, at the same time, taught forbearance. He hesitates to be angry, and delays to punish. The people are poor, exceedingly poor. The Defendant's wife says she has eight children; they are ignorant, and, in short, cannot be, in equity, judged as others in better circumstances. There are two other judgments against the Defendant, who is earning about 12s. a week, and the verdict is 1s. a month, first payment that day three weeks.

Then the solicitor for the Plaintiff in the 'horse case' rises and informs the Judge that

the parties cannot settle it, and the case must proceed. The Plaintiff and Defendant take their places, and some thirty witnesses file through the gangway to the witness-room to be out of Court. The bailiffs light the gas as the gloom deepens, and the solicitor begins his opening speech. The Judge has leant back in his chair, closed his eyes, and composed himself to listen. By the time two witnesses have been examined the hour has arrived when the Judge can sit no longer. He must leave, because on the morrow he has to hold a Court in another part of the county. The important 'horse case' and the other causes must wait a month. He sits to the very last moment, then hastily stuffs deeds, documents, papers of all descriptions into a portmanteau already overflowing, and rushes to his carriage.

He will go through much the same work to-morrow; combating the irritating misrepresentations, exposing suppressions, discovering the truth under a mountain of crass stupidity and wilful deceit. Next day he will be again at work; and the same process will go on the following week. In the month there are perhaps about five days—exclusive

of Sundays—upon which he does not sit. But those days are not holidays. They are spent in patiently reading a mass of deeds, indentures, contracts, vouchers, affidavits, evidence of every description and of the most voluminous character. These have been put in by solicitors, as part of their cases, and require the most careful attention. Besides causes that are actually argued out in open Court, there are others which, by consent of both parties, are placed in his hands as arbitrator. Many involve nice points of law, and require a written judgment in well-chosen words.

The work of the County Court Judge at the present day is simply enormous; it is ceaseless and never finished, and it demands a patience which nothing can ruffle. No matter how much falsehood may annoy him, a Judge with arbitrary power entrusted to him must not permit indignation alone to govern his decision. He must make allowances for all.

For the County Court in country districts has become a tribunal whose decisions enter as it were into the very life of the people. It is not concerned with a few important cases only; it has to arrange and finally settle what are

really household affairs. Take any village, and make inquiries how many householders there are who have not at one time or other come under the jurisdiction of the County Court ? Either as Plaintiff, or Defendant, or as witness, almost every one has had such experience, and those who have not have been threatened with it. Besides those defended cases that come before the Judge, there are hundreds upon hundreds of petty claims, to which no defence is offered, and which are adjudicated upon by the Registrar at the same time that the Judge hears the defended causes.

The labourer, like so many farmers in a different way, lives on credit and is perpetually in debt. He purchases his weekly goods on the security of hoeing, harvest, or piece work, and his wages are continually absorbed in payment of instalments, just as the tenant-farmer's income is too often absorbed in the payment of interest on and instalments of his loans. No one seems ever to pay without at least a threat of the County Court, which thus occupies a position like a firm appointed to perpetually liquidate a vast estate. It is for ever collecting shillings and half-crowns.

This is one aspect of the County Court; the other is its position with respect to property. It is the great arbitrator of property—of houses and land, and deeds, and contracts. Of recent years the number of the owners of land has immensely increased—that is, of small pieces—and the litigation has correspondingly grown. There is enough work for a man of high legal ability in settling causes of this character alone, without any ‘horse case’ with thirty witnesses, or any dispute that involves the conflict of personal testimony.

CHAPTER III.

THE BANK. THE OLD NEWSPAPER.

THE most imposing building in a certain country market town is the old Bank, so called familiarly to distinguish it from the new one. The premises of the old Bank would be quite unapproached in grandeur, locally, were it not for the enterprise of the new establishment. Nothing could be finer than the façade of the old Bank, which stands out clear and elegant in its fresh paint among the somewhat dingy houses and shops of the main street. It is rather larger in size, more lofty, and has the advantage of being a few yards nearer to the railway station. But the rival institution runs it very close. It occupies a corner on the very verge of the market-place—its door facing the farmer as he concludes his deal—and it is within a minute of the best hotels, where much business is done. It is

equally white and clean with fresh paint, and equally elegant in design.

A stranger, upon a nice consideration of the circumstances, might find a difficulty in deciding on which to bestow his patronage ; and perhaps the chief recommendation of the old establishment lies in the fact that it is the older of the two. The value of antiquity was never better understood than in these modern days. Shrewd men of business have observed that the quality of being ancient is the foundation of credit. Men believe in that which has been long established. Their fathers dealt there, they deal themselves, and if a new comer takes up his residence he is advised to do likewise.

A visitor desirous of looking on the outside, at least of country banking, would naturally be conducted to the old Bank. If it were an ordinary day, i.e. not a market or fair, he might stand on the pavement in front sunning himself without the least inconvenience from the passenger traffic. He would see, on glancing up and down the street, one or two aged cottage women going in or out of the grocer's, a postman strolling round, and a

distant policeman at the farthest corner. A sprinkling of boys playing marbles at the side of the pavement, and two men loading a waggon with sacks of flour from a warehouse, complete the scene as far as human life is concerned. There are dogs basking on door-steps, larger dogs rambling with idleness in the slow sway of their tails, and overhead black swifts (whose nests are in the roofs of the higher houses) dash to and fro, uttering their shrill screech.

The outer door of the bank is wide open—fastened back—ostentatiously open, and up the passage another mahogany door, closed, bears a polished brazen plate with the word ‘Manager’ engraved upon it. Everything within is large and massive. The swing door itself yields with the slow motion of solidity, and, unless you are agile as it closes in the rear, thrusts you forward like a strong gale. The apartment is large and lofty : there is room for a crowd, but at present there is no one at the counter. It is long enough and broad enough for the business of twenty customers at once ; so broad that the clerks on the other side are beyond arm’s reach. But

they have shovels with which to push the gold towards you, and in a small glass stand is a sponge kept constantly damp, across which the cashier draws his finger as he counts the silver, the slight moisture enabling him to sort the coin more swiftly.

The fittings are perfect, as perfect as in a London bank, and there is an air of extreme precision. Yonder open drawers are full of pass-books ; upon the desks and on the broad mantelpiece are piles of cheques, not scattered in disorder but arranged in exact heaps. The very inkstands are heavy and vast, and you just catch a glimpse round the edge of the semi-sentry box which guards the desk of the chief cashier, of a ledger so huge that the mind can hardly realise the extent of the business which requires such ponderous volumes to record it. Then beyond these a glass door, half open, apparently leads to the manager's room, for within it is a table strewn with papers, and you can see the green-painted iron wall of a safe.

The clerks, like the place, are somewhat imposing ; they are in no hurry, they allow you time to look round you and imbibe the

sense of awe which the magnificent mahogany counter and the brazen fittings, all the evidences of wealth, are so calculated to inspire. The hollow sound of your footstep on the floor does not seem heard; the slight ‘Ahem!’ you utter after you have waited a few moments attracts no attention, nor the rustling of your papers. The junior clerks are adding up column after column of figures, and are totally absorbed; the chief cashier is pondering deeply over a letter and annotating it. By-and-by he puts it down, and slowly approaches. But after you have gone through the preliminary ceremony of waiting, which is an institution of the place, the treatment quite changes. Your business is accomplished with practised ease, any information you may require is forthcoming on the instant, and deft fingers pass you the coin. In brief, the whole machinery of banking is here as complete as in Lombard Street. The complicated ramifications of commercial transactions are as well understood and as closely studied as in the ‘City.’ No matter what your wishes, provided, of course, that your credentials are unimpeachable, they

will be conducted for you satisfactorily and without delay.

Yet the green meadows are within an arrow shot, and standing on the threshold and looking down a cross street you can see the elms of the hedgerows closing in the prospect. It is really wonderful that such conveniences should be found in so apparently insignificant a place. The intelligence and courtesy of the officials is most marked. It is clear, upon reflection, that such intelligence, such manners, and knowledge not only of business but of men (for a banker and a banker's agent has often to judge at a moment's notice whether a man be a rogue or honest), cannot be had for nothing. They must be paid for, and, in so far at least as the heads are concerned, paid liberally. It is known that the old Bank has often paid twenty and twenty-five per cent. to its shareholders. Where does all this money come from? From Hodge, toiling in the field and earning his livelihood in the sweat of his brow? One would hardly think so at first, and yet there are no great businesses or manufacturing here. Somehow or other the money that pays for this courtesy and commercial

knowledge, for these magnificent premises and furniture, that pays the shareholders twenty-five per cent., must be drawn from the green meadows, the cornfields, and the hills where the sheep feed.

On an ordinary day the customers that come to the bank's counter may be reckoned on the fingers. Early in the morning the Post-office people come for their cash and change ; next, some of the landlords of the principal inns with their takings ; afterwards, such of the tradesmen as have cheques to pay in. Later on the lawyers' clerks, or the solicitors themselves drop in ; in the latter case for a chat with the manager. A farmer or two may call, especially on a Friday, for the cash to pay the labourers next day, and so the morning passes. In the afternoon one or more of the local gentry or clergy may drive up or may not—it is a chance either way—and as the hour draws near for closing some of the tradesmen come hurrying in again. Then the day, so far as the public are concerned, is over. To-morrow sees the same event repeated.

On a market-day there is a great bustle ;

men hustle in and out, with a bluff disregard of conventional politeness, but with no intention of rudeness. Through the open doors comes the lowing of cattle, and the baaing of sheep ; the farmers and dealers that crowd in and out bring with them an odour of animals that exhales from their garments. The clerks are now none too many, the long broad counter none too large ; the resources of the establishment are taxed to the utmost. The manager is there in person, attending to the more important customers.

In the crush are many ladies who would find their business facilitated by coming on a different day. But market-day is a tradition with all classes ; even the gentry appear in greater numbers. If you go forth into the market-place you will find it thronged with farmers. If you go into the Corn Hall or Exchange, where the corndealers have their stands, and where business in cereals and seeds is transacted ; if you walk across to the auction yard for cattle, or to the horse depository, where an auction of horses is proceeding ; everywhere you have to push your way through groups of agriculturists. The

hotels are full of them (the stable-yards full of their various conveyances), and the restaurant, the latest innovation in country towns, is equally filled with farmers taking a chop, and the inner rooms with ladies discussing coffee and light refreshments.

Now every farmer of all this crowd has his cheque-book in the breast pocket of his coat. Let his business be what it may, the purchase of cattle, sheep, horses, or implements, seed, or any other necessary, no coin passes. The parties, if the transaction be private, adjourn to their favourite inn, and out comes the cheque-book. If a purchase be effected at either of the auctions proceeding it is paid for by cheque, and, on the other hand, should the farmer be the vendor, his money comes to him in the shape of a cheque. With the exception of his dinner and the ostler, the farmer who comes to market carries on all his transactions with paper. The landlord of the hotel takes cash for the dinner, and the ostler takes his shilling. For the rest, it is all cheques, cheques, cheques; so that the whole business of agriculture, from

the purchase of the seed to the sale of the crop, passes through the bank.

The toll taken by the bank upon such transactions as simple buying and selling is practically *nil*; its profit is indirect. But besides the indirect profit there is the direct speculation of making advances at high interest, discounting bills, and similar business. It might almost be said that the crops are really the property of the local banks, so large in the aggregate are the advances made upon them. The bank has, in fact, to study the seasons, the weather, the probable market prices, the import of grain and cattle, and to keep an eye upon the agriculture of the world. The harvest and the prices concern it quite as much as the actual farmer who tills the soil. In good seasons, with a crop above the average, the business of the bank expands in corresponding ratio. The manager and directors feel that they can advance with confidence; the farmer has the means to pay. In bad seasons and with short crops the farmer is more anxious than ever to borrow; but the bank is obliged to contract its sphere of operations.

It usually happens that one or more of the directors of a country bank are themselves farmers in a large way—gentlemen farmers, but with practical knowledge. They are men whose entire lives have been spent in the locality, and who have a very wide circle of acquaintances and friends among agriculturists. Their forefathers were stationed there before them, and thus there has been an accumulation of local knowledge. They not only thoroughly understand the soil of the neighbourhood, and can forecast the effect of particular seasons with certainty, but they possess an intimate knowledge of family history, what farmer is in a bad way, who is doubtful, or who has always had a sterling reputation. An old-established country bank has almost always one or more such confidential advisers. Their assistance is invaluable.

Since agriculture became in this way, through the adoption of banking, so intimately connected with commerce, it has responded, like other businesses, to the fluctuations of trade. The value of money in Threadneedle-street affects the farmer in an obscure hamlet a hundred miles away, whose fathers knew

nothing of money except as a coin, a token of value, and understood nothing of the export or import of gold. The farmer's business is conducted through the bank, but, on the other hand, the bank cannot restrict its operations to the mere country-side. It is bound up in every possible manner with the vast institutions of the metropolis. Its private profits depend upon the rate of discount and the tone of the money market exactly in the same way as with those vast institutions. A difficulty, a crisis there is immediately felt by the country bank, whose dealings with its farmer customers are in turn affected.

Thus commerce acts upon agriculture. *Per contra*, the tradesmen of the town who go to the bank every morning would tell you with doleful faces that the condition of agriculture acts upon trade in a most practical manner. Neither the farmer, nor the farmer's wife and family expend nearly so much as they did at their shops, and consequently the sums they carry over to the bank are much diminished in amount. The local country tradesman probably feels the depression of agriculture all but as much as the farmer himself. The

tradesman is perhaps supported by the bank ; if he cannot meet his liabilities the bank is compelled to withdraw that support.

Much of this country banking seems to have grown up in very recent times. Any elderly farmer out yonder in the noisy market would tell you that in his young days when he first did business he had to carry coin with him, especially if at a distance from home. It was then the custom to attend markets and fairs a long way off, such markets being centres where the dealers and drovers brought cattle. The dealers would accept nothing but cash ; they would not have looked at a cheque had such a thing been proffered them. This old Bank prides itself upon the reputation it enjoyed, even in those days. It had the power of issuing notes, and these notes were accepted by such men, even at a great distance, the bank having so good a name. They were even preferred to the notes of the Bank of England, which at one time, in outlying country places, were looked on with distrust, a state of things which seems almost incredible to the present generation.

In those days men had no confidence.

That mutual business understanding, the credit which is the basis of all commerce of the present time, did not exist. Of course this only applies to the country and to country trading ; the business men of cities were years in advance of the agriculturists in this respect. But so good was the reputation of the old Bank, even in those times, that its notes were readily accepted. It is, indeed, surprising what a reputation some of the best of the country banks have achieved. Their names are scarcely seen in the money articles of the daily press. But they do a solid business of great extent, and their names in agricultural circles are names of power. So the old Bank here, though within an arrow shot of the green meadows, though on ordinary days a single clerk might attend to its customers, has really a valuable *clientèle*.

Of late years shrewd men of business discovered that the ranks of the British farmer offered a wonderful opportunity for legitimate banking. The farmer, though he may not be rich, must of necessity be the manager, if not the actual owner, of considerable capital. A man who farms, if only a hundred acres, must

have some capital. It may not be his own—it may be borrowed ; still he has the use of it. Here, then, a wide field opened itself to banking enterprise. Certainly there has been a remarkable extension of banking institutions in the country. Every market town has its bank, and in most cases two—branches of course, but banks to all intents and purposes. Branches are started everywhere.

The new Bank in this particular little town is not really new. It is simply a branch set up by a well-established bank whose original centre may perhaps be in another county. It is every whit as respectable as the other, and as well conducted. Its branch as yet lacks local antiquity, but that is the only difference. The competition for the farmer's business between these branches, scattered all over the length and breadth of the country, must of necessity be close. When the branch, or new Bank, came here, it was started in grand premises specially erected for it, in the most convenient situation that could be secured.

Till then the business of the old Bank had been carried on in a small and dingy basement. The room was narrow, badly lit,

and still worse ventilated, so that on busy days both the clerks and the customers complained of the stuffy atmosphere. The ancient fittings had become worn and defaced ; the ceiling was grimy ; the conveniences in every way defective. When it was known that a new branch was to be opened the directors of the old Bank resolved that the building, which had so long been found inadequate, should be entirely renovated. They pulled it down, and the present magnificent structure took its place.

Thus this little country town now possesses two banks, whose façades could hardly be surpassed in a city. There is perhaps a little rivalry between the managers of the two institutions, in social as well as in business matters. Being so long established there the old Bank numbers among its customers some of the largest landed proprietors, the leading clergy, and solicitors. The manager coming into contact with these, and being himself a man of intelligence, naturally occupies a certain position. If any public movement is set on foot, the banks strive as to which shall be most to the fore, and, aided by its antiquity,

the old Bank, perhaps, secures a social precedence. Both managers belong to the 'carriage people' of the town.

Hodge comes into the place, walking slowly behind cattle or sheep, or jolting in on a waggon. His wife comes, too, on foot, through the roughest weather, to fetch her household goods. His daughter comes into the hiring fair, and stands waiting for employment on the pavement in the same spot used for the purpose from time immemorial, within sight of the stately façades of the banks. He himself has stood in the market-place with reaping hook or hoe looking for a master. Humble as he may be, it is clear that the wealth in those cellars—the notes and the gold pushed over the counters in shovels—must somehow come from the labour which he and his immediate employer—the farmer—go through in the field.

It is becoming more and more the practice for the carter, or shepherd, who desires a new situation, to advertise. Instead of waiting for the chance of the hiring fair, he trudges into the market town and calls at the office of the oldest established local paper. There his

wishes are reduced to writing for him, he pays his money, and his advertisement appears. If there is any farmer advertising for a man, as is often the case, he at the same time takes the address, and goes over to offer his services. The farmer and the labourer alike look to the advertisement columns as the medium between them.

The vitality and influence of the old-fashioned local newspaper is indeed a remarkable feature of country life. It would be thought that in these days of cheap literature, these papers, charging twopence, threepence, and even fourpence per copy, could not possibly continue to exist. But, contrary to all expectation, they have taken quite a fresh start, and possess a stronger hold than ever upon the agricultural population. They enter into the old homesteads, and every member of the farmer's family carefully scans them, certain of finding a reference to this or that subject or person in whom he takes an interest.

Some such papers practically defy competition. In the outlying towns, where no factories have introduced a new element, it is vain for the most enterprising to start another. The

squire, the clergyman, the lawyer, the tenant farmer, the wayside inn-keeper stick to the old weekly paper, and nothing can shake it. It is one of the institutions of agriculture.

The office is, perhaps, in a side street of the quiet market town, and there is no display to catch the casual purchaser. No mystery surrounds the editor's sanctum; the visitor has but to knock, and is at once admitted to his presence. An office could scarcely be more plainly furnished. A common table, which has, however, one great virtue—it does not shake when written on—occupies the centre. Upon one side is a large desk or bureau; the account books lying open show that the editor, besides his literary labour, has to spend much time in double entry. Two chairs are so completely hidden under 'exchanges' that no one can sit upon them. Several of these 'exchanges' are from the United States or Australia, for the colonists are often more interested and concerned about local affairs in the old country than they are with the doings in the metropolis. Against the wall, too, hangs a picture of a fine steamer careering under sail and steam, and

near it a coloured sectional map of some new township marked out in squares. These are the advertisements of an Atlantic or Australian line, or of both ; and the editor is their agent. When the young ploughman resolves to quit the hamlet for the backwoods of America or the sheepwalks of Australia, he comes here to engage his berth. When the young farmer wearies of waiting for dead men's shoes—in no other way can he hope to occupy an English farm—he calls here and pays his passage-money, and his broad shoulders and willing hands are shipped to a land that will welcome him. A single shelf supports a few books, all for reference, such as the 'Clergy List,' for the Church is studied, and the slightest change that concerns the district carefully recorded.

Beneath this, the ponderous volumes that contain the file of the paper for the last forty years are piled, their weight too great for a shelf resting on the floor. The series constitutes a complete and authentic local history. People often come from a distance to consult it, for it is the only register that affords more than the simple entry of birth and death.

There is a life in the villages and hamlets

around, in the little places that are not even hamlets, which to the folk who dwell in them is fully as important as that of the greatest city. Farmhouses are not like the villas of cities and city suburbs. The villa has hardly any individuality; it is but one of many, each resembling the other, and scarcely separated. To-day one family occupies it, to-morrow another, next year perhaps a third, and neither of these has any real connection with the place. They are sojourners, not inhabitants, drawn thither by business or pleasure; they come and go, and leave no mark behind. But the farmhouse has a history. The same family have lived in it for, perhaps, a hundred years: they have married and intermarried, and become identified with the locality. To them all the petty events of village life have a meaning and importance: the slow changes that take place and are chronicled in the old newspaper have a sad significance, for they mark that flux of time which is carrying them, too, onwards to their rest.

These columns of the file, therefore, that to a stranger seem a blank, to the old folk and

their descendants are like a mirror, in which they can see the faces of the loved ones who passed away a generation since. They are the archives of the hamlets round about : a farmer can find from them when his grandfather quitted the old farm, and read an account of the sale. Men who left the village in their youth for the distant city or the still more distant colonies, as they grow in years often feel an irresistible desire to revisit the old, old place. The home they so fondly recollect is in other hands, and yet in itself but little changed. A few lines in the plainest language found in the file here tell to such a greybeard a story that fills his eyes with tears. But even a stranger who took the trouble to turn over the folios would now and then find matter to interest him : such as curious notes of archæological discovery, accounts of local customs now fallen into disuse, and traditions of the past. Many of these are worthy of collection in more accessible form.

There is hardly anything else in the room except the waste basket under the table. As the visitor enters, a lad goes out with a roll of manuscript in his hand, and the editor looks

up from his monotonous task of proof-reading, for he has that duty also to perform. Whatever he is doing, some one is certain to call and break off the thread of his thought. The bailiff or farm-steward of a neighbouring estate comes in to insert an advertisement of timber for sale, or of the auction of the ash-poles annually felled. A gamekeeper calls with a notice not to sport or trespass on certain lands. The editor has to write out the advertisement for these people, and for many of the farmers who come, for countrymen have the greatest dislike to literary effort of any kind, and can hardly be persuaded to write a letter. Even when they have written the letter they get the daughter to address the envelope, lest the Post Office should smile at their rude penmanship. The business of preparing the advertisement is not quickly concluded, for just as it is put down to their fancy, they recollect another item which has to be added. Then they stand and gossip about the family at the mansion and the affairs of the parish generally, totally oblivious of the valuable time they are wasting. Farmers look in to advertise a cottage or a house in the

village to let, and stay to explain the state of the crops, and the why and the wherefore of So-and-so leaving his tenancy.

The largest advertisers invariably put off their orders till the morning of the paper going to press, from sheer inattention. On that busy morning, auctioneers' clerks rush in with columns of auction sales of cattle, sheep, horses, hay, or standing crops (according to the season of the year), and every species of farm produce. After them come the solicitors' clerks, with equally important and lengthy notices of legal matters concerning the effects of farmers who have fallen into difficulties, of parochial or turnpike affairs, or 'Pursuant to an Act intituled "An Act to further amend the Law and to Relieve Trustees."' These notices have been lying on their desks for days, but are perversely sent down at the last moment, and upset the entire make-up of the paper.

Just as the editor has arranged for these, and is in the act to rush up into the press-room, a timid knock announces a poor cottage girl, who has walked in from a hamlet six or seven miles away to inquire the address of a

lady who wants a servant. This advertisement appeared at least three weeks since, for country folk could in no wise make up their minds to apply under three weeks, and necessitates a search back through the file, and a reference to divers papers. He cannot in common courtesy leave the poor girl to wait his convenience, and meantime the steam is up and the machine waiting. When the address is discovered, the girl thinks she cannot remember it, and so he has to write it down on a piece of paper for her.

He has no highly organised staff to carry on the routine work ; he has to look after every department as well as the purely editorial part. Almost every one who has a scrap of news or gossip looks in at the office to chat about it with him. Farmers, who have driven in to the town from distant villages, call to tell him of the trouble they are having over the new schools, and the conflict in the parish as to whether they shall or shall not have a school board. Clergymen from outlying vicarages come to mention that a cottage flower show, a penny reading, a confirmation, or some such event, is impending,

and to suggest the propriety of a full and special account. Occasionally a leading landed proprietor is closeted with him, for at least an hour, discussing local politics, and ascertaining from him the tone of feeling in the district.

Modern agricultural society insists upon publicity. The smallest village event must be chronicled, or some one will feel dissatisfied, and inquire why it was not put in the paper. This continual looking towards the paper for everything causes it to exercise a very considerable amount of influence. Perhaps the clergy and gentry are in some things less powerful than the local newspaper, for, from a variety of causes, agricultural society has become extremely sensitive to public opinion. The temperate and thoughtful arguments put forward by a paper in which they have confidence directly affect the tenant-farmers. On the other hand, as expressing the views of the tenant-farmers, the paper materially influences the course taken by the landed proprietors.

In country districts the mere numerical circulation of a weekly publication is no

measure of its importance. The position of the subscribers is the true test. These old established papers, in fact, represent property. They are the organs of all who possess lands, houses, stock, produce ; in short, of the middle class. This is evident from the advertising columns. The lawyer, the auctioneer, the land agent, the farmer, all who have any substance, publish their business in this medium. Official county advertisements appear in it. The carter and the shepherd look down the column of situations vacant as they call at the village inn for a glass of ale, or, if they cannot read, ask some one to read for them. But they do not purchase this kind of newspaper. The cottager spells over prints advocating the disestablishment of the Church, the division of great estates, and the general subversion of the present order of things. Yet when the labourer advertises, he goes to the paper subscribed to by his master. The disappearance of such an obsolete and expensive paper is frequently announced as imminent ; but the obsolete and expensive print, instead of disappearing, flourishes with renewed vitality. Solid matter, temperate argu-

ment, and genuine work, in the long run, pay the best. An editor who thus conducts his paper is highly appreciated by the local chiefs of his party, and may even help to contribute to the success of an Administration.

The personal labour involved in such editing must be great from the absence of trained assistance, and because the materials must be furnished by incompetent hands. Local news must be forwarded by local people, perhaps by a village tailor with literary tastes. Such correspondents often indulge in insinuations, or fulsome flattery, which must be carefully eliminated. From another village an account of some event comes from the schoolmaster—quite an important person nowadays!—who writes in a fair, round hand and uses the finest language and the longest words. He invariably puts ‘hebdomadal’ for ‘weekly.’ A lawyer’s clerk writes a narrative of some case, on blue foolscap, and, after the manner of legal documents, without a single stop from beginning to end.

Once a year comes the labour of preparing the sheet almanac. This useful publication is much valued by the tenants of the district, and

may be found pinned against the wall for ready reference in most farmhouses. Besides the calendar it contains a list of county and other officials, dates of quarter sessions and assizes, fair days and markets, records of the prices obtained at the annual sales of rams or short-horns on leading farms, and similar agricultural information.

The editor has very likely been born in the district, and has thus grown up to understand the wants and the spirit of the farming class. He is acquainted with the family history of the neighbourhood, a knowledge which is of much advantage in enabling him to avoid unnecessarily irritating personal susceptibilities. His private library is not without interest. It mainly consists of old books picked up at the farmhouse sales of thirty years. At such disposals of household effects volumes sometimes come to light that have been buried for generations among lumber. Many of these books are valuable and all worth examination. A man of simple and retiring habits, his garden is perhaps his greatest solace, and next to that a drive or stroll through the green meadows around. Incessant mental labour has forced

him to wear glasses before his time, and it is a relief and pleasure to the eyes to dwell on green sward and leaf. Such a man performs a worthy part in country life, and possesses the esteem of the country side.

CHAPTER IV.

THE VILLAGE FACTORY. VILLAGE VISITORS.
WILLOW-WORK.

IN the daytime the centre of a certain village may be said to be the shop of the agricultural machinist. The majority of the cottagers are away in the fields at work, and the place is elsewhere almost quiet. A column of smoke and a distant din guide the visitor to the spot where the hammers are clattering on the anvils.

Twisted iron, rusty from exposure, lies in confusion on the blackened ground before the shed. Coal dust and the carbon deposited from volumes of thick smoke have darkened the earth, and coated everything with a black crust. The windows of the shed are broken, probably by the accidental contact of long rods of iron carelessly cast aside, and some of the slates of the roof appear gone just above the

furnace, as if removed for ventilation and the escape of the intense heat. There is a creaking of stiff leather as the bellows rise and fall, and the roar of the blast as it is forced up through the glowing coals.

A ceaseless hum of wheels in motion comes from the rear, and the peculiar crackling sound of a band in rapid revolution round the drum of the engine and the shaft. Then the grinding scrape of sharp steel on iron as the edge of the tool cuts shavings from the solid metal rotating swiftly in the lathe. As blow follows blow the red-hot 'scale,' driven from the surface of the iron on the anvil by the heavy sledge, flies rattling against the window in a spray of fire. The ring of metal, the clatter, the roaring, and hissing of steam, fill the air, and through it rises now and then the shrill quick calls of men in command.

Outside, and as it seems but a stone's throw distant, stands the old grey church, and about it the still, silent, green-grown mounds over those who once followed the quiet plough.

Round the corner of the village street comes a man with a grimy red flag, and over

the roofs of the cottages rises a cloud of smoke, and behind it yet another. Two steam ploughing engines are returning from their work to their place beside the shed to wait fresh orders. The broad wheels of the engines block up the entire width of the street, and but just escape overthrowing the feeble palings in front of the cottage doors. Within those palings the children at play scarcely turn to look ; the very infants that can hardly toddle are so accustomed to the ponderous wonder that they calmly gnaw the crusts that keep them contented. It requires a full hour to get the unwieldy engines up the incline and round the sharp turns on to the open space by the workshop. The driver has to 'back,' and go-a-head, and 'back' again, a dozen times before he can reach the place, for that narrow bye-way was not planned out for such traffic. A mere path leading to some cottages in the rear, it was rarely used even by carts before the machinist came, and it is a feat of skill to get the engines in without, like a conqueror, entering by a breach battered in the walls. When, at last, they have been piloted into position, the steam is blown off,

and the rushing hiss sounds all over the village. The white vapour covers the ground like a cloud, and the noise re-echoes against the old grey church, but the jackdaws do not even rise from the battlements.

These engines and their corresponding tackle are the chief stock-in-trade of the village machinist. He lets them out to the farmers of the district, which is principally arable; that is, he contracts to do their ploughing and scarifying at so much per acre. In the ploughing seasons the engines are for ever on the road, and with their tackle dragging behind them take up the highway like a train. One day you may hear the hum and noise from a distant field on the left; in a day or two it comes from another on the right; next week it has shifted again, and is heard farther off northwards, and so all round the compass.

The visitor, driving about the neighbourhood, cannot but notice the huge and cumbersome-looking plough left awhile on the sward by the roadside. One half of the shares stand up high in the air, the other half touch the ground, and it is so nicely balanced that boys

sometimes play at see-saw on it. He will meet the iron monster which draws this plough by the bridge over the brook, pausing while its insatiable thirst is stayed from the stream. He will see it patiently waiting, with a slight curl of steam over the boiler, by the wayside inn while its attendants take their lunch.

It sometimes happens in wet weather that the engines cannot be moved from the field where they have been ploughing. The soil becomes so soft from absorbing so much water that it will not bear up the heavy weight. Logs and poles are laid down to form a temporary way, but the great wheels sink too deeply, and the engines have to be left covered with tarpaulins. They have been known to remain till the fresh green leaves of spring on the hedges and trees almost hid them from sight.

The machinist has another and lighter traction engine which does not plough, but travels from farm to farm with a threshing machine. In autumn it is in full work threshing, and in winter drives chaff-cutters for the larger farmers. Occasionally it draws a load of coal in waggons or trucks built for the

purpose. Hodge's forefathers knew no rival at plough time ; after the harvest they threshed the corn all the winter with the flail. Now the iron horse works faster and harder than he.

Some of the great tenant-farmers have sets of ploughing engines and tackle of their own, and these are frequently at the machinist's for repairs. The reaping, mowing, threshing, haymaking, hoeing, raking, and other machines and implements also often require mending. Once now and then a bicyclist calls to have his machine attended to, something having given way while on a tour. Thus the village factory is in constant work, but has to encounter immense competition.

Country towns of any size usually possess at least one manufactory of agricultural implements, and some of these factories have acquired a reputation which reaches over sea. The visitor to such a foundry is shown medals that have been granted for excellence of work exhibited in Vienna, and may see machines in process of construction which will be used upon the Continent ; so that the village machinist, though apparently isolated, with

nothing but fields around him, has in reality competitors upon every side.

Ploughing engines, again, travel great distances, and there are firms that send their tackle across a county or two. Still the village factory, being on the spot, has plenty of local work, and the clatter of hammers, the roar of the blast, and the hum of wheels never cease at the shed. Busy workmen pass to and fro, lithe men, quick of step and motion, who come from Leeds, or some similar manufacturing town, and whose very step distinguishes them in a moment from the agricultural labourer.

A sturdy ploughboy comes up with a piece of iron on his shoulder; it does not look large, but it is as much as he can carry. One edge of it is polished by the friction of the earth through which it has been forced; it has to be straightened, or repaired, and the ploughboy waits while it is done. He sits down outside the shed on a broken and rusty iron wheel, choosing a spot where the sun shines and the building keeps off the wind. There, among the twisted iron, ruins and fragments of machines, he takes out his hunch of bread and

cheese, and great clasp knife, and quietly enjoys his luncheon. He is utterly indifferent to the noise of the revolving wheels, the creak of the bellows, the hiss of steam; he makes no inquiry about this or that, and shows no desire to understand the wonders of mechanics. Something in his attitude—in the immobility, the almost animal repose of limb; something in the expression of his features, the self-contained oblivion, so to say, suggests an Oriental absence of aspiration. Only by negatives and side-lights, as it were, can any idea be conveyed of his contented indifference. He munches his crust; and, when he has done, carefully, and with vast deliberation, replaces his heavy shoe. The sunshine illumines the old grey church before him, and falls on the low green mounds, almost level with the sward, which cover his ancestors.

These modern inventions, this steam, and electric telegraph, and even the printing-press have but just skimmed the surface of village life. If they were removed—if the pressure from without, from the world around, ceased, in how few years the village and the hamlet would revert to their original condition!

On summer afternoons, towards five or six o'clock, a four-wheel carriage—useful, but not pretentious—comes slowly up the hill leading to the village. The single occupant is an elderly man, the somewhat wearied expression of whose features is caused by a continuous application to business. The horse, too well fed for work, takes his own time up the hill, and when at the summit the reins are gently shaken, makes but an idle pretence to move faster, for he knows that his master is too good-natured and forbearing to use the whip, except to fondly stroke his back. The reins are scarcely needed to guide the horse along the familiar road to a large farmhouse on the outskirts of the village, where at the gate two or more children are waiting to welcome 'papa.'

Though a farmhouse, the garden is laid out in the style so often seen around detached villas, with a lawn for tennis and croquet, parterres bright with summer flowers, and seats under the pleasant shade of the trees. Within it is furnished in villa fashion, and is in fact let to a well-to-do tradesman of the market town a few miles distant. He has

wisely sent his family for the summer months to inhale the clear air of the hills, as exhilarating as that of the sea. There they can ride the pony and donkeys over the open sward, and romp and play at gipsying. Every evening he drives out to join them, and every morning returns to his office. The house belongs to some large tenant-farmer, who has a little freehold property, and thus makes a profit from it.

This practice of hiring a village home for the summer has become common of recent years among the leading tradesmen of country towns. Such visitors are welcome to the cottage folk. They require the service of a labourer now and then; they want fresh eggs, and vegetables from the allotment gardens. The women have the family washing to do, and a girl is often needed to assist indoors, or a boy to clean the knives and shoes. Many perquisites fall to the cottage people—cast aside dresses, and so on; besides which there are little gifts and kindnesses from the lady and her children.

Towards November again, the congregation in the old church one Sunday morn-

ing find subject for speculation concerning a stranger who enters a certain well-appointed pew appropriated to The Chestnuts. He is clearly the new tenant who has taken it for the hunting season. The Chestnuts is a mansion built in modern style for a former landowner. As it is outside the great hunting centres it is let at a low rental compared with its accommodation. The labourers are glad to see that the place is let again, for although the half-pay officer—the new occupant—who has retired, wounded and decorated, from the service of a grateful country, has probably not a third the income of the tradesman, and five times the social appearance to maintain, still there will be profit to be got from him.

What chance has such a gentleman in bargaining with the cottagers? How should he know the village value of a cabbage? How should he understand the farmyard value of a fowl? It may possibly strike him as odd that vegetables should be so dear when, as he rides about, he sees whole fields green with them. He sees plenty of fowls, and geese, and turkeys, gobbling and cackling about the farmyards, and can perhaps after a while

faintly perceive that they are the perquisites of the ladies of the tenants' households, who drive him a very hard bargain. He, too, has cast aside suits, shoes, hats, and so forth, really but little worn, to give away to the poor. If married, his family require some help from the cottage women; and there are odd jobs, well paid for, on the place for the men. Thus the cottagers are glad of the arrival of their new masters, the one in the summer, the other in the winter months.

The 'chapel-folk' of the place have so increased in numbers and affluence that they have erected a large and commodious building in the village. Besides the cottagers, many farmers go to the chapel, driving in from the ends of the parish. It is a curious circumstance that many of the largest dealers in agricultural produce, such as cheese, bacon, and corn, and the owners of the busiest wharves where coal and timber, slate, and similar materials are stored, belong to the Dissenting community. There are some agricultural districts where this class of business is quite absorbed by Dissenters—almost as much as money-changing and banking busi-

ness is said to be the exclusive property of Jews in some Continental countries. Such dealers are often substantial and, for the country, even wealthy men. Then there are the Dissenting tradesmen of the market town. All these together form a species of guild. The large chapel in the village was built by their united subscriptions. They support each other in a marked manner in times of difficulty, so that it is rare for a tenant-farmer of the persuasion to lose his position unless by wilful misconduct. This mutual support is so very marked as to be quite a characteristic fact.

The cottagers and their families go to chapel with these masters. But sometimes the cottager, as he approaches the chapel door, finds upon it (as in the church porch) a small printed notice affixed there by the overseers. If the labourer is now recognised as a person whose opinion is to be consulted, on the other hand he finds that he is not without responsibilities. The rate-collector knocks at the cottage door as well as at the farmer's. By gradual degrees village rates are becoming a serious burden, and though their chief incidence may be upon the landlord and the tenant,

indirectly they begin to come home to the labourer. The school rate is voluntary, but it is none the less a rate ; the cemetery, the ancient churchyard being no more available, has had to be paid for, and, as usual, probably cost twice what was anticipated. The highways, the sanitary authority, not to speak of poor relief, all demand a share. Each in itself may be only a straw, but accumulated straws in time fill a waggon.

One side of the stable of the village inn, which faces the road, presents a broad surface for the country bill-sticker. He comes out from the market town, and travels on foot for a whole day together, from hamlet to hamlet, posting up the contents of his bag in the most outlying and lonely districts. Every villager as he passes by reads the announcements on the wall : the circus coming to the market town, some jeweller's marvellous watches, the selling off of spring or summer goods by the drapers at an immense reduction, once now and then a proclamation headed V.R., and the sales of farm stock (the tenants leaving) and of large freehold properties.

These latter are much discussed by the

callers at the inn. A carter comes along perhaps with a loaded waggon from some distance, and as he stays to drink his quart talks of the changes that are proceeding or imminent in his locality. Thus the fact that changes are contemplated is often widely known before the actual advertisement is issued. The labourers who hear the carter's story tell it again to their own employer next time they see him, and the farmer meeting another farmer gossips over it again.

There has grown up a general feeling in the villages and agricultural districts that the landed estates around them are no longer stable and enduring. A feeling of uncertainty is abroad, and no one is surprised to hear that some other place, or person, is going. It is rumoured that this great landlord is about to sell as many farms as the family settlements will let him. Another is only waiting for the majority of his son to accomplish the same object. Others, it is said, are proceeding abroad to retrench. Properties are coming into the market in unexpected directions, and others are only kept back because the price of land has fallen, and there is a difficulty in

selling a large estate. If divided into a number of lots, each of small size, land still fetches its value, and can be readily sold ; but that is not always convenient, and purchasers hesitate to invest in extensive estates. But though kept back, efforts are being made to retrench, and, it is said, old mansions that have never been let before can now be hired for the season. 'Not only the tenant-farmers, but the landowners are passing through a period of depression, and their tenure too is uncertain. Such is the talk of the country side as it comes to the village inn.

Once a week the discordant note of a horn or bugle, loudly blown by a man who does not understand his instrument, is heard at intervals. It is the newspaper vendor, who, like the bill-sticker, starts from the market town on foot, and goes through the village with a terrible din. He stops at the garden gate in the palings before the thatched cottage, delivers his print to the old woman or the child sent out with the copper, and starts again with a flourish of his trumpet. His business is chiefly with the cottagers, and his print is very likely full of abuse of the landed

proprietors as a body. He is a product of modern days, almost the latest, and as he goes from cottage door to cottage door, the discordant uproar of his trumpet is a sign of the times.

In some districts the osier plantations give employment to a considerable number of persons. The tall poles are made into posts and rails ; the trunks of the pollard trees when thrown are cut into small timber that serves many minor purposes ; the brushwood or tops that are cut every now and then make thatching sticks and faggots ; sometimes hedges are made of a kind of willow wicker-work for enclosing gardens. It is, however, the plantations of withy or osier that are most important. The willow grows so often in or near to water that in common opinion the association cannot be too complete. But in the arrangement of an osier-bed water is utilised, indeed, but kept in its place—i.e. at the roots, and not over the stoles. The osier should not stand in water, or rise, as it were, out of a lake—the water should be in the soil underneath, and the level of the ground higher than the surface of the adjacent stream.

Before planting, the land has to be dug or ploughed, and cleared; the weeds collected in the same way as on an arable field. The sticks are then set in rows eighteen inches apart, each stick (that afterwards becomes a stole) a foot from its neighbours of the same row. At first the weeds require keeping down, but after a while the crop itself kills them a good deal. Several willows spring from each planted stick, and at the end of twelve months the first crop is ready for cutting. Next year the stick or stole will send up still more shoots, and give a larger yield.

The sorts generally planted are called Black Spanish and Walnut Leaf. The first has a darker bark, and is a tough wood; the other has a light yellow bark, and grows smoother and without knots, which is better for working up into the manufactured article. Either will grow to nine feet high—the average height is six or seven feet. The usual time for cutting is about Good Friday—that is, just before the leaf appears. After cutting, the rods are stacked upright in water, in long trenches six inches deep prepared for the purpose, and there they remain till the

leaf comes out. The power of growth displayed by the willow is wonderful—a bough has only to be stuck in the earth, or the end of a pole placed in the brook, for the sap to rise and shoots to push forth.

When the leaf shows the willows are carried to the ‘brakes,’ and the work of stripping off the bark commences. A ‘brake’ somewhat resembles a pair of very blunt scissors permanently fixed open at a certain angle, and rigidly supported at a convenient height from the ground. The operator stands behind it, and selecting a long wand from the heap beside him places it in the ‘brake,’ and pulls it through, slightly pressing it downwards. As he draws it towards him, the edges of the iron tear the bark and peel it along the whole length of the stick. There is a knack in the operation, of course, but when it is acquired the wand is peeled in a moment by a dexterous turn of the wrist, the bark falls to the ground on the other side of the brake, and the now white stick is thrown to the right, where a pile soon accumulates. The peel is handy for tying up, and when dried makes a capital material for lighting fires. This stripping of

the osiers is a most busy time in the neighbourhood of the large plantations—almost like hop-picking—for men, women, and children can all help. It does not require so much strength as skill and patience.

After the peeling the sticks have to be dried by exposure to the sun ; they are then sorted into lengths, and sold in bundles. If it is desired to keep them any time they must be thoroughly dried, or they will ‘heat’ and rot and become useless. This willow harvest is looked forward to by the cottagers who live along the rivers as an opportunity for earning extra money. The quantity of osier thus treated seems immense, and yet the demand is said to be steady, and as the year advances the price of the willow rises. It is manufactured into all kinds of baskets—on farms, especially arable farms, numbers of baskets are used. Clothes baskets, market baskets, chaff baskets, bassinettes or cradles, &c., are some few of the articles manufactured from it. Large quantities of willow, too, are worked up unpeeled into hampers of all kinds. The number of hampers used in these days is beyond computation, and as they are con-

stantly wearing out, fresh ones have to be made. An advantage of the willow is that it enables the farmer to derive a profit from land that would otherwise be comparatively valueless. Good land, indeed, is hardly fitted for osier; it would grow rank with much pith in the centre, and therefore liable to break. On common land, on the contrary, it grows just right, and not too coarse. Almost any scrap or corner does for willow, and if properly tended it speedily pays for the labour.

The digging and preparation of the ground gives employment, and afterwards the weeding and the work required to clean the channels that conduct water round and through the beds. Then there is the cutting and the peeling, and finally the basket-making; and thus the willow, though so common as to be little regarded, finds work for many hands.

CHAPTER V.

HODGE'S FIELDS.

THE labourer working all the year round in the open air cannot but note to some degree those changes in tree and plant which coincide with the variations of his daily employment. Early in March, as he walks along the southern side of the hedge, where the dead oak leaves still cumber the trailing ivy, he can scarcely avoid seeing that pointed tongues of green are pushing up. Some have widened into black-spotted leaves ; some are notched like the many-barbed bone harpoons of savage races. The hardy docks are showing, and the young nettles have risen up. Slowly the dark and grey hues of winter are yielding to the lively tints of spring. The blackthorn has white buds on its lesser branches, and the warm rays of the sun have drawn forth the buds on one favoured hawthorn in a

sheltered nook, so that the green of the coming leaf is visible. Bramble bushes still retain their forlorn, shrivelled foliage ; the hardy all but evergreen leaves can stand cold, but when biting winds from the north and east blow for weeks together even these curl at the edge and die.

The remarkable power of wind upon leaves is sometimes seen in May, when a strong gale, even from the west, will so beat and batter the tender horse-chestnut sprays that they bruise and blacken. The slow plough traverses the earth, and the white dust rises from the road and drifts into the field. In winter the distant copse seemed black ; now it appears of a dull reddish brown from the innumerable catkins and buds. The delicate sprays of the birch are fringed with them, the aspen has a load of brown, there are green catkins on the bare hazel boughs, and the willows have white 'pussy-cats.' The horse-chestnut buds—the hue of dark varnish—have enlarged, and stick to the finger if touched ; some are so swollen as to nearly burst and let the green appear. Already it is becoming more difficult to look

right through the copse. In winter the light could be seen on the other side ; now catkin, bud, and opening leaf have thickened and check the view. The same effect was produced not long since by the rime on the branches in the frosty mornings ; while each smallest twig was thus lined with crystal it was not possible to see through. Tangled weeds float down the brook, catching against projecting branches that dip into the stream, or slowly rotating and carried apparently up the current by the eddy and back-water behind the bridge. In the pond the frogs have congregated in great numbers ; their constant ‘ croo-croo ’ is audible at some distance.

The meadows, so long bound by frost and covered with snow, are slowly losing their wan aspect, and assuming a warmer green as the young blades of grass come upwards. Where the plough or harrow has passed over the clods they quickly change from the rich brown of fresh-turned soil to a whiter colour, the dryness of the atmosphere immediately dissipating the moisture in the earth. So, examine what you will, from the clod to the tiniest branch, the hedge, the mound, the

water—everywhere a step forward has been taken. The difference in a particular case may be minute ; but it is there, and together these faint indications show how closely spring is approaching.

As the sun rises the chaffinch utters his bold challenge on the tree ; the notes are so rapid that they seem to come all at once. Welcome, indeed, is the song of the first finch. Sparrows are busy in the garden—the hens are by far the most numerous now, half a dozen together perch on the bushes. One suddenly darts forth and seizes a black insect as it flies in the sunshine. The bee, too, is abroad, and once now and then a yellow butterfly. From the copse on the warmer days comes occasionally the deep hollow bass of the wood pigeon. On the very topmost branch of an elm a magpie has perched ; now he looks this way, and then turns that, bowing in the oddest manner, and jerking his long tail up and down. Then two of them flutter across the field—feebly, as if they had barely strength to reach the trees in the opposite hedge. Extending their wings they float slowly, and every now and then the body

undulates along its entire length. Rooks are building—they fly and feed now in pairs; the rookery is alive with them. To the steeple the jackdaws have returned and fly round and round; now one holds his wings rigid and slides down at an angle of sixty degrees at a breakneck pace, as if about to dash himself in fragments on the garden beneath.

Sometimes there come a few days which are like summer. There is an almost cloudless sky, a gentle warm breeze, and a bright sun filling the fields with a glow of light. The air, though soft and genial, is dry, and perhaps it is this quality which gives so peculiar a definition to hedge, tree, and hill. A firm, almost hard, outline brings copse and wood into clear relief; the distance across the broadest fields appears sensibly diminished. Such freedom from moisture has a deliciously exhilarating effect on those who breathe so pure an atmosphere. The winds of March differ, indeed, in a remarkable manner from the gales of the early year, which, even when they blow from a mild quarter, compel one to keep in constant movement because of the

aqueous vapour they carry. But the true March wind, though too boisterous to be exactly genial, causes a joyous sense of freshness, as if the very blood in the veins were refined and quickened upon inhaling it. There is a difference in its roar—the note is distinct from the harsh sound of the chilly winter blast. On the lonely highway at night, when other noises are silent, the March breeze rushes through the tall elms in a wild cadence. The white clouds hasten over, illuminated from behind by a moon approaching the full ; every now and then a break shows a clear blue sky and a star shining. Now a loud roar resounds along the hedgerow like the deafening boom of the surge ; it moderates, dies away, then an elm close by bends and sounds as the blast comes again. In another moment the note is caught up and repeated by a distant tree, and so one after another joins the song till the chorus reaches its highest pitch. Then it sinks again, and so continues with pauses and deep inspirations, for March is like a strong man drawing his breath full and long as he starts to run a race.

The sky, too, like the earth, whose hedges, trees, and meadows are acquiring fresher colours, has now a more lovely aspect. At noon-day, if the clouds be absent, it is a rich azure; after sunset a ruddy glow appears almost all round the horizon, while the thrushes sing in the wood till the twilight declines. At night, when the moon does not rise till late, the heavens are brilliant with stars. In the east Arcturus is up; the Great Bear, the Lesser Bear, and Cassiopeia are ranged about the Pole. Procyon goes before the Dog; the noble constellation of Orion stretches broad across the sky; almost overhead lucent Capella looks down. Aries droops towards the west; the Bull follows with the red Aldebaran, and the Pleiades. Behind these, Castor and Pollux, and next the cloud-like, nebulous Cancer. Largest of all, great Sirius is flaming in the south, quivering with the ebb and flow of his light, sometimes with an emerald scintillation like a dewdrop on which a sunbeam glances.

The busy summer, with its haymaking, reaping, and continuous succession of harvest work, passes too swiftly for reflection both for

masters and men. But in the calm of autumn there is time again to look round. Then white columns of smoke rise up slowly into the tranquil atmosphere, till they overtop the tallest elms, and the odour of the burning couch is carried across the meadows from the lately-ploughed stubble, where the weeds have been collected in heaps and fired. The stubble itself, short and in regular lines, affords less and less cover every year. As the seed is now drilled in, and the plants grow in mathematically straight lines, of course when the crop is reaped, if you stand at one side of the field you can see right across between the short stubbs, so that a mouse could hardly find shelter. Then quickly come the noisy steam ploughing engines, after them the couch collectors, and finally the heaps are burnt, and the strong scent of smoke hangs over the ground. Against these interruptions of their haunts and quiet ways what are the partridges to do? Even at night the place is scarcely their own, for every now and then, as the breeze comes along, the smouldering fires are fanned into bright flame, enough to alarm the boldest bird.

In another broad arable field, where the teams have been dragging the plough, but have only just opened a few furrows and gone home, a flock of sheep are feeding, or rather picking up a little, having been turned in, that nothing might be lost. There is a sense of quietness—of repose; the trees of the copse close by are still, and the dying leaf as it drops falls straight to the ground. A faint haze clings to the distant woods at the foot of the hills; it is afternoon, the best part of an autumn day, and sufficiently warm to make the stile a pleasant resting-place. A dark cloud, whose edges rise curve upon curve, hangs in the sky, fringed with bright white light, for the sun is behind it, and long, narrow streamers of light radiate from the upper part like the pointed rays of an antique crown. Across an interval of blue to the eastward a second massive cloud, white and shining as if beaten out of solid silver, fronts the sun, and reflects the beams passing horizontally through the upper ether downwards on the earth like a mirror.

The sparrows in the stubble rise in a flock and settle down again. Yonder a solitary

lark is singing. Then the sun emerges, and the yellow autumn beams flood the pale stubble and the dark red earth of the furrow. On the bushes in the hedge hang the vines of the bryony, bearing thick masses of red berries. The hawthorn leaves in places have turned pale, and are touched, too, towards the stalk with a deep brown hue. The contrast of the two tints causes an accidental colour resembling that of bronze, which catches the eye at the first glance, but disappears on looking closer. Spots of yellow on the elms seem the more brilliant from the background of dull green. The drooping foliage of the birch exhibits a paler yellow; the nut-tree bushes shed brown leaves upon the ground. Perhaps the beech leaves are the most beautiful; two or three tints are blended on the topmost boughs. There is a ruddy orange hue, a tawny brown, and a bright green; the sunlight comes and mingles these together. The same leaf will sometimes show two at least of these colours—green shading into brown, or into a ruddy gold. Later on, the oaks, in a monochrome of buff, will rival the beeches. Now and then an acorn drops from the tree over-

head, with a smart tap on the hard earth, and rebounds some inches high. Some of these that fall are already dark—almost black—but if opened they will be found bored by a grub. They are not yet ripe as a crop; the rooks are a good guide in that respect, and they have not yet set steadily to work upon this their favourite autumn food. Others that have fallen and been knocked out of the cup are a light yellow at the base and green towards the middle and the point; the yellow part is that which has been covered by the cup. In the sward there is a small hole from out of which creeps a wasp at intervals; it is a nest, and some few of them are still at work. But their motions are slow and lack vivacity; before long, numbers must die, and already many have succumbed after crawling miserably on the ground which they spurned a short while since, when with a brisk buzz they flew from apple to plum.

In the quiet woodland lane a covey of partridges are running to and fro on the short sward at the side, and near them two or three pheasants are searching for food. The geometrical spiders—some of them look almost

as big as a nut—hang their webs spun to a regular pattern on the bushes. The fungi flourish; there is a huge specimen on the elm there, but the flowers are nearly gone.

A few steps down the lane, upon looking over a gate into a large arable field where the harrow has broken up the clods, a faint bluish tinge may be noticed on the dull earth in the more distant parts. A second glance shows that it is caused by a great flock of wood-pigeons. Some more come down out of the elms and join their companions; there must be a hundred and fifty or two hundred of them. The woodpigeon on the ground at a distance is difficult to distinguish, or rather to define individually—the pale blue tint seems to confuse the eye with a kind of haze. Though the flock take little notice now—knowing themselves to be far out of gunshot—yet they would be quickly on the alert if an attempt were made to approach them.

Already some of the elms are becoming bare—there are gaps in the foliage where the winds have carried away the leaves. On the bramble bushes the blackberries cluster thickly, unseen and ungathered in this wild spot.

The happy hearts that go a-blackberrying think little of the past : yet there is a deep, a mournful significance attached to that joyous time. For how many centuries have the blackberries tempted men, women, and children out into the fields, laughing at scratched hands and nettles, and clinging burrs, all merrily endured for the sake of so simple a treasure-trove. Under the relics of the ancient pile-dwellings of Switzerland, disinterred from the peat and other deposits, have been found quantities of blackberry seeds, together with traces of crabs and sloes ; so that by the dwellers in those primeval villages in the midst of the lakes the wild fruits of autumn were sought for much as we seek them now ; the old instincts are strong in us still.

The fieldfares will soon be here now, and the red-wings, coming as they have done for generations about the time of the sowing of the corn. Without an almanack they know the dates ; so the old sportsmen used to declare that their pointers and setters were perfectly aware when September was approaching, and showed it by unusual restlessness. By the brook the meadows are green and the

grass long still ; the flags, too, are green, though numbers of dead leaves float down on the current. There is green again where the root crops are flourishing ; but the brown tints are striving hard, and must soon gain the mastery of colour. From the barn comes the clatter of the winnowing machine, and the floor is covered with heaps of grain.

After the sun has gone down and the shadows are deepening, it is lighter in the open stubbles than in the enclosed meadows—the short white stubbs seem to reflect what little light there is. The partridges call to each other, and after each call run a few yards swiftly, till they assemble at the well-known spot where they roost. Then comes a hare stealing by without a sound. Suddenly he perceives that he is watched, and goes off at a rapid pace, lost in the brooding shadow across the field. Yonder a row of conical-roofed wheat-ricks stand out boldly against the sky, and above them a planet shines.

Still later, in November, the morning mist lingers over gorse and heath, and on the upper surfaces of the long dank grass blades, bowed by their own weight, are white beads of dew.

Wherever the eye seeks an object to dwell on, there the cloud-like mist seems to thicken as though to hide it. The bushes and thickets are swathed in the vapour; yonder, in the hollow, it clusters about the oaks and hangs upon the hedge looming in the distance. There is no sky—a motionless, colourless something spreads above; it is, of course, the same mist, but looking upwards it apparently recedes and becomes indefinite. The glance finds no point to rest on—as on the edges of clouds—it is a mere opaque expanse. But the air is dry, the moisture does not deposit itself, it remains suspended, and waits but the wind to rise and depart. The stillness is utter: not a bird calls or insect buzzes by. In passing beneath the oaks the very leaves have forgotten to fall. Only those already on the sward, touched by the frost, crumble under the footstep. When green they would have yielded to the weight, but now stiffened they resist it and are crushed, breaking in pieces.

A creaking and metallic rattle, as of chains, comes across the arable field—a steady gaze reveals the dim outline of a team of horses slowly dragging the plough, their shapes in-

distinctly seen against the hedge. A bent figure follows, and by-and-by another distinct creak and rattle, and yet a third in another direction, show that there are more teams at work, plodding to and fro. Watching their shadowy forms, suddenly the eye catches a change in the light somewhere. Over the meadow yonder the mist is illuminated ; it is not sunshine, but a white light, only visible by contrast with the darker mist around. It lasts a few moments, and then moves, and appears a second time by the copse. Though hidden here, the disk of the sun must be partly visible there, and as the white light does not remain long in one place, it is evident that there is motion now in the vast mass of vapour. Looking upwards there is the faintest suspicion of the palest blue, dull and dimmed by mist, so faint that its position cannot be fixed, and the next instant it is gone again.

But the teams at plough are growing momentarily distinct—a breath of air touches the cheek, then a leaf breaks away from the bough and starts forth as if bent on a journey, but loses the impetus and sinks to the ground.

Soon afterwards the beams of the sun light up a distant oak that glows in the hedge—a rich deep buff—and it stands out, clear, distinct, and beautiful, the chosen and selected one, the first to receive the ray. Rapidly the mist vanishes—disappearing rather than floating away ; a circle of blue sky opens overhead, and, finally, travelling slowly, comes the sunshine over the furrows. There is a perceptible sense of warmth—the colours that start into life add to the feeling. The bare birch has no leaf to reflect it, but its white bark shines, and beyond it two great elms, the one a pale green and the other a pale yellow, stand side by side. The brake fern is dead and withered ; the tip of each frond curled over downwards by the frost, but it forms a brown background to the dull green furze which is alight here and there with scattered blossom, by contrast so brilliantly yellow as to seem like flame. Polished holly leaves glisten, and a bunch of tawny fungus rears itself above the grass.

On the sheltered sunny bank lie the maple leaves fallen from the bushes, which form a bulwark against the north wind ; they have simply dropped upon the ivy which

almost covers the bank. Standing here with the oaks overhead and the thick bushes on the northern side it is quite warm and genial; so much so that it is hard to realise that winter is at hand. But even in the shortest days, could we only get rid of the clouds and wind, we should find the sunshine sufficiently powerful to make the noontide pleasant. It is not that the sun is weak or low down, nor because of the sharp frosts, that winter with us is dreary and chill. The real cause is the prevalence of cloud, through which only a dull light can penetrate, and of moisture-laden winds.

If our winter sun had fair play we should find the climate very different. Even as it is, now and then comes a break in the masses of vapour streaming across the sky, and if you are only sheltered from the wind (or stand at a southern window), the temperature immediately rises. For this reason the temperatures registered by thermometers are often far from being a correct record of the real weather we have had. A bitter frost early in the morning sends the mercury below zero, but perhaps, by eleven o'clock the day is warm, the sky being

clear and the wind still. The last register instituted—that of the duration of sunshine, if taken in connection with the state of the wind—is the best record of the temperature that we have actually felt. These thoughts naturally arise under the oaks here as the bright sunlight streams down from a sky the more deeply blue from contrast with the brown, and buff, and yellow leaves of the trees.

Hark ! There comes a joyous music over the fields—first one hound's note, then two, then three, and then a chorus ; they are opening up a strong scent. It rises and falls—now it is coming nearer, in a moment I shall see them break through the hedge on the ridge—surely that was a shout ! Just in the very moment of expectation the loud tongues cease ; I wait, listening breathlessly, but presently a straggling cry or two shows that the pack has turned and are spread wide trying to recover. By degrees the sounds die away ; and I stroll onwards.

A thick border of dark green firs bounds the copse—the brown leaves that have fallen

from the oaks have lodged on the foliage of the firs and are there supported. In the sheltered corner some of the bracken has partly escaped the frost, one frond has two colours. On one side of the rib it is green and on the other yellow. The grass is strewn with the leaves of the aspen, which have turned quite black. Under the great elms there seems a sudden increase of light—it is caused by the leaves which still remain on the branches ; they are all of the palest yellow, and, as you pass under, give the impression of the tree having been lit up—illuminated with its own colour. From the bushes hang the red berries of the nightshade, and the fruit on the briars glistens in the sun. Inside the copse stand innumerable thistles shoulder high, dead and gaunt ; and a grey border running round the field at the bottom of the hedge shows where the tall, strong weeds of summer have withered up. A bird flutters round the topmost boughs of the elm yonder and disappears with a flash of blue—it is a jay. Here the grass of the meadow has an undertone of grey ; then an arable field succeeds ; where six strong horses are drawing the

heavy drill, and great bags of the precious seed are lying on the furrows.

Another meadow, where note a broken bough of elder, the leaves on which have turned black, while still on its living branches they are green, and then a clump of beeches. The trunks are full of knot-holes ; after a dead bough has fallen off and the stump has rotted away, the bark curls over the orifice and seemingly heals the wound more smoothly and completely than with other trees. But the mischief is proceeding all the same, despite that flattering appearance ; outwardly the bark looks smooth and healthy, but probe the hole and the rottenness is working inwards. A sudden gap in the clump attracts the glance, and there—with one great beech trunk on this side and another on that—is a view opening down on the distant valley far below. The wood beneath looks dwarfed, and the uneven tops of the trees, some green, some tinted, are apparently so close together as to hide aught else, and the shadows of the clouds move over it as over a sea. A haze upon the horizon brings plain and sky together there ; on one side, in the far distance a huge

block, a rude vastness stands out dusky and dimly defined—it is a spur of the rolling hills.

Out in the plain, many a mile away, the sharp, needle-like point of a steeple rises white above the trees, which there shade and mingle into a dark mass—so brilliantly white as to seem hardly real. Sweeping the view round, there is a strange and total absence of houses or signs of habitation, other than the steeple, and now that, too, is gone. It has utterly vanished—where, but a few moments before it glowed with whiteness, is absolutely nothing. The disappearance is almost weird in the broad daylight, as if solid stone could sink into the earth. Searching for it suddenly a village appears some way on the right—the white walls stand out bright and clear, one of the houses is evidently of large size, and placed on a slight elevation is a prominent object. But as we look it fades, grows blurred and indistinct, and in another moment is gone. The whole village has vanished—in its place is nothing; so swift is the change that the mind scarcely credits the senses.

A deep shadow creeping towards us ex-

plains it. Where the sunlight falls, there steeple or house glows and shines ; when it has passed, the haze that is really there, though itself invisible, instantly blots out the picture. The thing may be seen over and over again in the course of a few minutes ; it would be difficult for an artist to catch so fleeting an effect. The shadow of the cloud is not black—it lacks several shades of that—there is in it a faint and yet decided tint of blue. This tone of blue is not the same everywhere—here it is almost distinct, there it fades ; it is an aerial colour which rather hints itself than shows. Commencing the descent the view is at once lost, but we pass a beech whose beauty is not easily conveyed. The winds have scarcely rifled it ; being in a sheltered spot on the slope, the leaves are nearly perfect. All those on the outer boughs are a rich brown—some, perhaps, almost orange. But there is an inner mass of branches of lesser size which droop downwards, something after the manner of a weeping willow ; and the leaves on these are still green and show through. Upon the whole tree a flood of sunshine pours, and over it is the azure sky. The mingling, shading,

and contrast of these colours give a lovely result—the tree is aglow, its foliage ripe with colour.

Farther down comes the steady sound of deliberate blows, and the upper branches of the hedge fall beneath the steel. A sturdy labourer, with a bill on a pole, strikes slow and strong and cuts down the hedge to an even height. A dreadful weapon that simple tool must have been in the old days before the advent of the arquebus. For with the exception of the spike, which is not needed for hedge work, it is almost an exact copy of the brown bill of ancient warfare ; it is brown still, except where sharpened. Wielded by a sinewy arm, what gaping gashes it must have slit through helm and mail and severed bone ! Watch the man there—he slices off the tough thorn as though it were straw. He notes not the beauty of the beech above him, nor the sun, nor the sky ; but on the other hand, when the sky is hidden, the sun gone, and the beautiful beech torn by the raving winds neither does he heed that. Rain and tempest affect him not ; the glaring heat of summer, the bitter frost of winter are alike to him. He

is built up like an oak. Believe it, the man that from his boyhood has stood ankle-deep in the chill water of the ditch, patiently labouring with axe and bill ; who has trudged across the furrow, hand on plough, facing sleet and mist ; who has swung the sickle under the summer sun—this is the man for the trenches. This is the man whom neither the snows of the North nor the sun of the South can vanquish ; who will dig and delve, and carry traverse and covered way forward in the face of the fortress, who will lie on the bare ground in the night. For they who go up to battle must fight the hard earth and the tempest, as well as face bayonet and ball. As of yore with the brown bill, so now with the rifle—the muscles that have been trained about the hedges and fields will not fail England in the hour of danger.

Hark !—a distant whoop—another, a blast of a horn, and then a burst of chiding that makes the woods ring. Down drops the bill, and together, heedless of any social difference in the common joy, we scramble to the highest mound, and see the pack sweep in full cry across the furrows. Crash—it is the bushes

breaking, as the first foam-flecked, wearied horse hardly rises to his leap, and yet crushes safely through, opening a way, which is quickly widened by the straggling troop behind. Ha! down the lane from the hill dashes another squadron that has crossed the chord of the arc and comes in fresher. Ay, and a third is entering at the bottom there, one by one, over the brook. Woods, field, and paths, but just before an empty solitude, are alive with men and horses. Up yonder, along the ridge, gallops another troop in single file, well defined against the sky, going parallel to the hounds. What a view they must have of the scene below! Two ladies who ride up with torn skirts cannot lift their panting horses at the double mound. Well, let us defy 'wilful damage' for once. The gate, jealously padlocked, is swiftly hoisted off its hinges, and away they go with hearty thanks. We slip the gate on again just as some one hails to us across the field to wait a minute, but seeing it is only a man we calmly replace the timber and let him take his chance. He is excited, but we smile stolidly. In another minute the wave of life is gone; it has swept over and

disappeared as swiftly as it came. The wood, the field, and lane seem painfully—positively painfully—empty. Slowly the hedger and ditcher goes back to his work, where in the shade under the bushes even now the dew lingers.

So there are days to be enjoyed out of doors even in much-abused November. And when the wind rises and the storm is near, if you get under the lee of a good thick copse there is a wild pleasure in the frenzy that passes over. With a rush the leaves stream outwards, thickening the air, whirling round and round; the tree-tops bend and sigh, the blast strikes them, and in an instant they are stripped and bare. A spectral rustling, as the darkness falls and the black cloud approaches, is the fallen leaves in the copse, lifted up from their repose and dashed against the underwood. Then a howl of wrath descends and fills the sense of hearing, so that for the moment it is hard to tell what is happening. A rushing hiss follows, and the rain hurtles through the branches, driving so horizontally as to pass overhead. The sheltering thorn-thicket stirs, and a long, deep, moaning roar rises from the

fir-trees. Another howl that seems to stun—to so fill the ears with sound that they cannot hear—the aerial host charges the tree-ranks, and the shock makes them tremble to the root. Still another and another ; twigs and broken boughs fly before it and strew the sward ; larger branches that have long been dead fall crashing downwards ; leaves are forced right through the thorn-thicket, and strike against the face. Fortunately, so fierce a fury cannot last ; presently the billows of wind that strike the wood come at longer intervals and with less vigour ; then the rain increases, and yet a little while and the storm has swept on. The very fury—the utter *abandon*—of its rage is its charm ; the spirit rises to meet it, and revels in the roar and buffeting.

By-and-by they who have faced it have their reward. The wind sinks, the rain ceases, a pale blue sky shows above, and then yonder appears a majesty of cloud—a Himalaya of vapour. Crag on crag rises the vast pile—such jagged and pointed rocks as never man found on earth, or, if he found, could climb—topped with a peak that towers to the heavens,

and leans—visibly leans—and threatens to fall and overwhelm the weak world at its feet. A gleam as of snow glitters on the upper rocks, the passes are gloomy and dark, the faces of the precipices are lit up with a golden gleam from the rapidly-sinking sun. So the magic structure stands and sees the great round disk go down. The night gathers around those giant mounts and dark space receives them.

CHAPTER VI.

A WINTER'S MORNING.

THE pale beams of the waning moon still cast a shadow of the cottage, when the labourer rises from his heavy sleep on a winter's morning. Often he huddles on his things and slips his feet into his thick 'water-tights'—which are stiff and hard, having been wet over night—by no other light than this. If the household is comparatively well managed, however, he strikes a match, and his 'dip' shows at the window. But he generally prefers to save a candle, and clatters down the narrow steep stairs in the semi-darkness, takes a piece of bread and cheese, and steps forth into the sharp air. The cabbages in the garden he notes are covered with white frost, so is the grass in the fields, and the footpath is hard under foot. In the furrows is a little ice—white because the water has shrunk from be-

neath it, leaving it hollow—and on the stile is a crust of rime, cold to the touch, which he brushes off in getting over. Overhead the sky is clear—cloudless but pale—and the stars, though not yet fading, have lost the brilliant glitter of midnight. Then, in all their glory, the idea of their globular shape is easily accepted; but in the morning, just as the dawn is breaking, the absence of glitter conveys the impression of flatness—circular rather than globular. But yonder, over the elms, above the cowpens, the great morning star has risen, shining far brighter, in proportion, than the moon; an intensely clear metallic light—like incandescent silver.

The shadows of the trees on the frosted ground are dull. As the footpath winds by the hedge the noise of his footstep startles the blackbird roosting in the bushes, and he bustles out and flies across the field. There is more rime on the posts and rails around the rickyard, and the thatch on the haystack is white with it in places. He draws out the broad hay-knife—a vast blade, wide at the handle, the edge gradually curving to a point—and then searches for the rubber or whet-

stone, stuck somewhere in the side of the rick. At the first sound of the stone upon the steel the cattle in the adjoining yard and sheds utter a few low 'moos,' and there is a stir among them. Mounting the ladder he forces the knife with both hands into the hay, making a square cut which bends outwards, opening from the main mass till it appears on the point of parting and letting him fall with it to the ground. But long practice has taught him how to balance himself half on the ladder, half on the hay. Presently, with a truss unbound and loose on his head, he enters the yard, and passes from crib to crib, leaving a little here and a little there. For if he fills one first, there will be quarrelling among the cows, and besides, if the crib is too liberally filled, they will pull it out and tread it under foot. The cattle that are in the sheds fattening for Christmas have cake as well, and this must be supplied in just proportion.

The hour of milking, which used to be pretty general everywhere, varies now in different places, to suit the necessities of the milk trade. The milk has, perhaps, to travel three or four miles to the railway station; near great

towns, where some of the farmers deliver milk themselves from house to house, the cows are milked soon after noonday. What would their grandfathers have said to that? But where the old customs have not much altered, the milker sits down in the morning to his cow with the stars still visible overhead, punching his hat well into her side—a hat well battered and thickly coated with grease, for the skin of the cow exudes an unctuous substance. This hat he keeps for the purpose. A couple of milking pails—they are of large size—form a heavy load when filled. The milker, as he walks back to the farmhouse, bends his head under the yoke—whence so many men are round-shouldered—and steps slowly with a peculiar swaying motion of the body, which slight swing prevents it from spilling.

Another man who has to be up while the moon casts a shadow is the carter, who must begin to feed his team very early in order to get them to eat sufficient. If the manger be over-filled they spill and waste it, and at the same time will not eat so much. This is tedious work. Then the lads come and polish up the harness, and so soon as it is well light

get out to plough. The custom with the horses is to begin to work as early as possible, but to strike off in the afternoon some time before the other men, the lads riding home astride. The strength of the carthorse has to be husbanded carefully, and the labour performed must be adjusted to it and to the food, i.e. fuel, consumed. To manage a large team of horses, so as to keep them in good condition, with glossy coats and willing step, and yet to get the maximum of work out of them, requires long experience and constant attention. The carter, therefore, is a man of much importance on a farm. If he is up to his duties he is a most valuable servant; if he neglects them he is a costly nuisance, not so much from his pay, but because of the hindrance and disorganisation of the whole farm-work which such neglect entails.

Foggers and milkers, if their cottages are near at hand, having finished the first part of the day's work, can often go back home to breakfast, and, if they have a good woman in the cottage, find a fire and hot tea ready. The carter can rarely leave his horses for that, and, therefore, eats his breakfast in the stable;

but then he has the advantage that up to the time of starting forth he is under cover. The fogger and milker, on the other hand, are often exposed to the most violent tempests. A gale of wind, accompanied with heavy rain, often reaches its climax just about the dawn. They find the soil saturated, and the step sinks into it—the furrows are full of water; the cow-yard, though drained, is a pool, no drain being capable of carrying it off quick enough. The thatch of the sheds drips continually; the haystack drips; the thatch of the stack, which has to be pulled off before the hay-knife can be used, is wet; the old decaying wood of the rails and gates is wet. They sit on the three-legged milking-stool (whose rude workmanship has taken a dull polish from use) in a puddle; the hair of the cow, against which the head is placed, is wet; the wind blows the rain into the nape of the neck behind, the position being stooping. Staggering under the heavy yoke homewards, the boots sink deep into the slush and mire in the gateways, the weight carried sinking them well in. The teams do not usually work in very wet weather, and most of the out-door

work waits ; but the cattle must be attended to, Sundays and holidays included. Even in summer it often happens that a thunderstorm bursts about that time of the morning. But in winter, when the rain is driven by a furious wind, when the lantern is blown out, and the fogger stumbles in pitchy darkness through mud and water, it would be difficult to imagine a condition of things which concentrates more discomfort.

If, as often happens, the man is far from home—perhaps he has walked a mile or two to work—of course he cannot change his clothes, or get near a fire, unless in the farmer's kitchen. In some places the kitchen is open to the men, and on Sundays, at all events, they get a breakfast free. But the kindly old habits are dying out before the hard-and-fast money system and the abiding effects of unionism, which, even when not prominently displayed, causes a silent, sullen estrangement.

Shepherds, too, sometimes visit the fold very early in the morning, and in the lambing season may be said to be about both day and night. They come, however, under a different

category to the rest of the men, because they have no regular hours, but are guided solely by the season and the work. A shepherd often takes his ease when other men are busily labouring. On the other hand, he is frequently anxiously engaged when they are sleeping. His sheep rule his life, and he has little to do with the artificial divisions of time.

Hedgers and ditchers often work by the piece, and so take their own time for meals ; the ash woods, which are cut in the winter, are also usually thrown by the piece. Hedging and ditching, if done properly, is hard work, especially if there is any grubbing. Though the arms get warm from swinging the grub-axe or billhook, or cleaning out the ditch and plastering and smoothing the side of the mound with the spade, yet feet and ankles are chilled by the water in the ditch. This is often dammed up and so kept back partially, but it generally forces its way through. The ditcher has a board to stand on ; there is a hole through it, and a projecting stick attached, with which to drag it into position. But the soft soil allows the

board to sink, and he often throws it aside as more encumbrance than use. He has some small perquisites: he is allowed to carry home a bundle of wood or a log every night, and may gather up the remnants after the faggoting is finished. On the other hand, he cannot work in bad weather.

Other men come to the farm buildings to commence work about the time the carter has got his horses fed, groomed, and harnessed, and after the fogger and milker have completed their early duties. If it is a frosty morning and the ground firm, so as to bear up a cart without poaching the soil too much, the manure is carried out into the fields. This is plain, straightforward labour, and cannot be looked upon as hard work. If the cattle want no further attention, the foggers and milkers turn their hands after breakfast to whatever may be going on. Some considerable time is taken up in slicing roots with the machine, or chaff-cutting—monotonous work of a simple character, and chiefly consisting in turning a handle.

The general hands—those who come on

when the carter is ready, and who are usually young men, not yet settled down to any particular branch—seem to get the best end of the stick. They do not begin so early in the morning by some time as the fogger, milker, carter, or shepherd ; consequently, if the cottage arrangements are tolerable, they can get a comfortable breakfast first. They have no anxieties or trouble whatever ; the work may be hard in itself, but there is no particular hurry (in their estimation) and they do not distress themselves. They receive nearly the same wages as the others who have the care of valuable flocks, herds, and horses ; the difference is but a shilling or two, and, to make up for that, they do not work on Sundays. Now, the fogger must feed his cows, the carter his horses, the shepherd look to his sheep every day ; consequently their extra wages are thoroughly well earned. The young labourer—who is simply a labourer, and professes no special branch—is, therefore, in a certain sense, the best off. He is rarely hired by the year—he prefers to be free, so that when harvest comes he may go where wages chance to be highest. He is an inde-

pendent person, and full of youth, strength, and with little experience of life, is apt to be rough in his manners and not over civil. His wages too often go in liquor, but if such a young man keeps steady (and there are a few that do keep steady) he does very well indeed, having no family to maintain.

A set of men who work very hard are those who go with the steam-ploughing tackle. Their pay is so arranged as to depend in a measure on the number of acres they plough. They get the steam up as early as possible in the morning, and continue as late as they can at night. Just after the harvest, when the days are long, and, indeed, it is still summer, they work for extremely long hours. Their great difficulty lies in getting water. This must be continually fetched in carts, and, of course, requires a horse and man. These are not always forthcoming in the early morning, but they begin as soon as they can get water for the boiler, and do not stop till the field be finished or it is dark.

The women do not find much work in the fields during the winter. Now and then

comes a day's employment with the threshing-machine when the farmer wants a rick of corn threshed out. In pasture or dairy districts some of them go out into the meadows and spread the manure. They wear gaiters, and sometimes a kind of hood for the head. If done carefully, it is hard work for the arms—knocking the manure into small pieces by striking it with a fork swung to and fro smartly.

In the spring, when the great heaps of roots are opened—having been protected all the winter by a layer of straw and earth—it is necessary to trim them before they are used. This is often done by a woman. She has a stool or log of wood to sit on, and arranges a couple of sacks or something of the kind, so as to form a screen and keep off the bitter winds which are then so common—colder than those of the winter proper. With a screen one side, the heap of roots the other, and the hedge on the third, she is in some sense sheltered, and, taking her food with her, may stay there the whole day long, quite alone in the solitude of the broad, open, arable fields.

From a variety of causes, the number of women working in the fields is much less than was formerly the case ; thus presenting precisely the reverse state of things to that complained of in towns, where the clerks, &c., say that they are undersold by female labour. The contrast is rather curious. The price of women's labour has, too, risen ; and there does not appear to be any repugnance on their part to field-work. Whether the conclusion is to be accepted that there has been a diminution in the actual number of women living in rural places, it is impossible to decide with any accuracy. But there are signs that female labour has drifted to the towns quite as much as male—especially the younger girls. In some places it seems rare to see a young girl working in the field (meaning in winter)—those that are to be found are generally women well advanced in life. Spring and summer work brings forth more, but not nearly so many as used to be the case.

Although the work of the farm begins so soon in the morning, it is, on the other hand, in the cold months, over early. ' The night

cometh when no man can work' was, one would think, originally meant in reference to agricultural labour. It grows dusk before half-past four on a dull winter's day, and by five is almost, if not quite, dark. Lanterns may be moving in the cowyards and stables ; but elsewhere all is quiet—the hedger and ditcher cannot see to strike his blow, the ploughs have ceased to move for some time, the labourer's workshop—the field—is not lighted by gas as the rooms of cities.

The shortness of the winter day is one of the primary reasons why, in accordance with ancient custom, wages are lowered at that time. In summer, on the contrary, the hours are long, and the pay high—which more than makes up for the winter reduction. A labourer who has any prudence can, in fact, do very well by putting by a portion of his extra summer wages for the winter ; if he does not choose to exercise common sense, he cannot expect the farmer (or any manufacturer) to pay the same price for a little work and short time as for much work and long hours. Reviewing the work the labourer actually does

in winter, it seems fair and just to state that the foggers, or milkers, i.e. the men who attend on cattle, the carters, and the shepherds, work hard, continuously, and often in the face of the most inclement weather. The mere labourers, who, as previously remarked, are usually younger and single men, do not work so hard, nor so long. And when they are at it—whether turning the handle of a winnowing machine in a barn, cutting a hedge, spreading manure, or digging—it must be said that they do not put the energy into it of which their brawny arms are capable.

‘The least work and the most money,’ however, is a maxim not confined to the agricultural labourer. Recently I had occasion to pass through a busy London street in the West-end where the macadam of the roadway was being picked up by some score of men, and, being full of the subject of labour, I watched the process. Using the right hand as a fulcrum and keeping it stationary, each navvy slowly lifted his pick with the left half-way up, about on a level with his waistcoat; when the point of the pick was barely two

feet above the ground. He then let it fall—simply by its own weight—producing a tiny indentation such as might be caused by the kick of one's heel. It required about three such strokes, if they could be called strokes, to detach one single small stone. After that exhausting labour the man stood at ease for a few minutes, so that there were often three or four at once staring about them, while several others lounged against the wooden railing placed to keep vehicles back.

A more irritating spectacle it would be hard to imagine. Idle as much agricultural labour is, it is rarely so lazy as that. How contractors get their work done, if that is a sample, it is a puzzle to understand. The complaint of the poor character of the work performed by the agricultural labourer seems also true of other departments, where labour—pure and simple labour of thews and sinews—is concerned. The rich city merchant, who goes to his office daily, positively works harder, in spite of all his money. So do the shopmen and assistants behind their counters; so do the girls in drapers' shops,

standing the whole day and far into the evening when, as just observed, the fields have been dark for hours ; so, indeed, do most men and women who earn their bread by any other means than mere bodily strength.

But the cattle-men, carters, and shepherds, men with families and settled, often seem to take an interest in their charges, in the cows, horses, or sheep : some of them are really industrious, deserving men. The worst feature of unionism is the lumping of all together, for where one man is hardly worth his salt, another is a good workman. It is strange that such men as this should choose to throw in their lot with so many who are idle—whom they must know to be idle—thus jeopardising their own position for the sake of those who are not worth one-fifth the sacrifice the agricultural cottager must be called upon to make in a strike. The hard-working carter or cattle-man, according to the union theory, is to lose his pay, his cottage, his garden, and get into bad odour with his employer, who previously trusted him, and was willing to give him assistance, in order

that the day labourer, who has no responsibilities either of his own or his master's, and who has already the best end of the stick, should enjoy still further opportunities for idleness.

CHAPTER VII.

THE LABOURER'S CHILDREN. COTTAGE GIRLS.

IN the coldest weather one or more of the labourer's children are sure to be found in the farmyard somewhere. After the mother has dressed her boy (who may be about three or four years old) in the morning, he is at once turned out of doors to take care of himself, and if, as is often the case, the cottage is within a short distance of the farmyard, thither he toddles directly. He stands about the stable door, watching the harnessing of the great carthorses, which are, from the very first, the object of his intense admiration. But he has already learnt to keep out of the way, knowing that his presence would not otherwise be tolerated a moment, and occupies a position which enables him to dart quickly behind a tree, or a rick.

When the horses are gone he visits the

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outhouse, where the steam-engine is driving the chaff-cutter, or peers in at the huge doors of the barn, where with wide wooden shovel the grain is being moved. Or he may be met with round the hay-ricks, dragging a log of wood by a piece of tar cord, the log representing a plough. As you come upon him suddenly he draws up to the rick as if the hay was his natural protector, and looks up at you with half-frightened, half-curious gaze, and mouth open. His hat is an old one of his father's, a mile too big, coming down over his ears to his shoulders, well greased from ancient use—a thing not without its advantage, since it makes it impervious to rain. He wears what was a white jacket, but is now the colour of the prevailing soil of the place ; a belt ; and a pair of stumping boots, the very picture in miniature of his father's, heeled and tipped with iron. His naked legs are red with the cold, but thick and strong ; his cheeks are plump and firm, his round blue eyes bright, his hair almost white, like bleached straw.

An hour or two ago his skin was clean enough, for he was sent out well washed, but

it is now pretty well grimed, for he has been making himself happy in the dirt, as a boy should do if he be a boy. For one thing it is clean dirt, nothing but pure mother earth, and not the nasty unctuous filth of city courts and back lanes. If you speak to him he answers you sturdily—if you can catch the meaning of his words, doubly difficult from accent and imperfect knowledge of construction. But he means well, and if you send him on an errand will run off to find ‘measter’ as fast as his short stature will allow. He will potter about the farmyard the whole morning, perhaps turning up at home for a lunch of a slice of bread well larded. His little sister, not so old as himself, is there, already beginning her education in the cares of maternity, looking after the helpless baby that crawls over the wooden threshold of the door with bare head, despite the bitter cold. Once during the day he may perhaps steal round the farmhouse, and peer wistfully from behind the tubs or buckets into the kitchen, when, if the mistress chances to be about, he is pretty certain to pick up some trifle in the edible line.

How those prosperous parents who dwell

in highly-rented suburban villas, and send out their children for a walk with a couple of nurses and a 'bow-wow' to run beside the perambulator, would be eaten up with anxiety did their well-dressed boys or girls play where this young son of toil finds his amusement! Under the very hoofs of the cart-horses—he will go out to them when they are loose in the field, three or four in a group, under a tree, when it looks as if the slightest movement on their part must crush him; down to the side of the deep broad brook to swim sticks in it for boats, where a slip on the treacherous mud would plunge him in, and where the chance of rescue—everybody being half a mile away at work—would be absolutely *nil*. The cows come trampling through the yard; the bull bellows in the meadow; great, grunting sows, savage when they have young, go by, thrusting their noses into and turning up the earth for food; steam ploughing engines pant and rumble about; carts are continually coming and going; and he is all day in the midst of it without guardian of any kind whatsoever. The fog, and frost, and cutting winter winds

make him snivel and cry with the cold, and yet there he is out in it—in the draughts that blow round the ricks, and through the hedge bare of leaves. The rain rushes down pitilessly—he creeps inside the barn or shed, and with a stick splashes the puddles. The long glaring days of summer see him exposed to the scorching heat in the hay, or the still hotter harvest field. Through it all he grows stout and strong, and seems happy enough.

He is, perhaps, more fortunate than his sister, who has to take part in the household work from very early age. But the village school claims them both after awhile ; and the greater number of such schools are well filled, taking into consideration the long distances the children have to come and the frequent bad state of the roads and lanes. Both the employers and the children's own parents get them to school as much as possible ; the former put on a mild compulsion, the latter for the most part are really anxious for the schooling, and have even an exaggerated idea of the value of education. In some cases it would seem as if the parents actually educated themselves in some degree from their

own children, questioning them as to what they have been told. But, on the other hand, the labourer objects to paying for the teaching, and thinks the few coppers he is charged a terrible extortion.

The lads, as they grow older and leave school, can almost always find immediate employment with their father on the same farm, or on one close by. Though they do not now go out to work so soon, yet, on the other hand, when they do commence they receive higher weekly wages. The price paid for boys' labour now is such that it becomes a very important addition to the aggregate income of the cottager. When a man has got a couple of boys out, bringing home so much per week, his own money, of course, goes very much farther.

The girls go less and less into the field. If at home, they assist their parents at harvest time when work is done by the acre, and the more a man can cut, the better he is off; but their aim is domestic service, and they prefer to be engaged in the towns. They shirk the work of a farmhouse, especially if it is a dairy, and so it has come to be quite a complaint

among farmers' wives, in many places, that servants are not to be obtained. Those that are available are mere children, whose mothers like them to go out anywhere at first, just to obtain an insight into the duties of a servant. The farmer's wife has the trouble and annoyance of teaching these girls the rudiments of household work, and then, the moment they are beginning to be useful, they leave, and almost invariably go to the towns. Those that remain are the slow-witted, or those who are tied in a measure by family difficulties—as a bedridden mother to attend to ; or, perhaps, an illegitimate child of her own may fetter the cottage girl. Then she goes out in the day-time to work at the farmhouse, and returns to sleep at home.

Cottage girls have taken to themselves no small airs of recent years—they dress, so far as their means will go, as flashily as servants in cities, and stand upon their dignity. This foolishness has, perhaps, one good effect—it tends to diminish the illegitimate births. The girls are learning more self-respect—if they could only achieve that and eschew the other follies it would be a clear gain. It may be

questioned whether purely agricultural marriages are as common as formerly. The girl who leaves her home for service in the towns sees a class of men—grooms, footmen, artisans, and workmen generally—not only receiving higher wages than the labourers in her native parish, but possessing a certain amount of comparative refinement. It is not surprising that she prefers, if possible, to marry among these.

On the other hand, the young labourer, who knows that he can get good wages wherever he likes to go, has become somewhat of a wanderer. He roams about, not only from village to village, but from county to county; perhaps works for a time as a navvy on some distant railway, and thus associates with a different class of men, and picks up a sort of coarse cynicism. He does not care to marry and settle and tie himself down to a routine of labour—he despises home pleasures, preferring to spend his entire earnings upon himself. The roaming habits of the rising generation of labourers is an important consideration, and it has an effect in many ways. Statistics are not available; but the impression left on the

mind is that purely rural marriages are not so frequent, notwithstanding that wages at large have risen. When a young man does marry, he and his wife not uncommonly live for a length of time with his parents, occupying a part of the cottage.

Had any one gone into a cottage some few years back and inquired about the family, most probably the head of the house could have pointed out all his sons and daughters engaged in or near the parish. Most likely his own father was at work almost within hail. Uncles, cousins, various relations, were all near by. He could tell where everybody was. To-day if a similar inquiry were made, the answer would often be very different. The old people might be about still, but the younger would be found scattered over the earth. One, perhaps, went to the United States or Canada in the height of the labourers' agitation some years ago, when agents were busy enlisting recruits for the Far West. Since then another has departed for Australia, taking with him his wife. Others have migrated northwards, or to some other point of the compass—they are still in the old country, but the exact

whereabouts is not known. The girls are in service a hundred miles away—some married in the manufacturing districts. To the middle-aged, steady, stay-at-home labourer, the place does not seem a bit like it used to. Even the young boys are restless, and talking of going somewhere. This may not be the case with every single individual cottage family, but it is so with a great number. The stolid phalanx of agricultural labour is slowly disintegrating.

If there yet remains anything idyllic in the surroundings of rural cottage life, it may be found where the unmarried but grown-up sons—supposing these, of course, to be steady—remain at home with their parents. The father and head of the house, having been employed upon one farm for the last thirty years or more, though nominally carter, is really a kind of bailiff. The two young men work on at the same place, and lodge at home, paying a small weekly sum for board and lodging. Their sister is probably away in service; their mother manages the cottage. She occasionally bears a hand in indoor work at the farmhouse, and in the harvest time aids a little in the field, but otherwise does not

labour. What is the result? Plenty to eat, good beds, fairly good furniture, sufficient fuel, and some provision for contingencies, through the benefit club. As the wages are not consumed in drink, they have always a little ready money, and, in short, are as independent as it is possible for working men to be, especially if, as is often the case, the cottage and garden is their own, or is held on a small quit-rent. If either of the sons in time desires to marry, he does not start utterly unprovided. His father's influence with the farmer is pretty sure to procure him a cottage; he has some small savings himself, and his parents in the course of years have accumulated some extra furniture, which is given to him.

If a cottage, where the occupants are steady like this, be visited in the evening, say towards seven o'clock, when dinner is on the table (labourers dining or supping after the conclusion of the day's work) the fare will often be found of a substantial character. There may be a piece of mutton—not, of course, the prime cut, but wholesome meat—cabbages, parsnips, carrots (labourers like a profusion of vege-

tables), all laid out in a decent manner. The food is plain, but solid and plentiful. If the sister out in service wishes to change her situation, she has a home to go to meanwhile. Should any dispute occur with the employer the cottage is still there, and affords a shelter till the difficulty is settled or other work obtained. In towns the workman who has been earning six or even ten shillings a day, and paying a high rent (carefully collected every week), no sooner gets his discharge than he receives notice to quit his lodgings, because the owner knows he will not be paid. But when the agricultural labourer has a quit-rent cottage, or one of his own, he has a permanent resource, and can look round for another engagement.

The cooking in the best cottages would not commend itself to the student of that art : in those where the woman is shiftless it would be deemed simply intolerable. Evidence of this is only too apparent on approaching cottages, especially towards the evening. Coming from the fresh air of the fields, perhaps from the sweet scent of clover or of new-mown grass, the odour which arises from the cottages

is peculiarly offensive. It is not that they are dirty inside—the floor may be scrubbed, the walls brushed, the chairs clean, and the beds tidy ; it is from outside that all the noisome exhalations taint the breeze. The refuse vegetables, the washings, the liquid and solid rubbish generally is cast out into the ditch, often open to the highway road, and there festers till the first storm sweeps it away. The cleanest woman indoors thinks nothing disgusting out of doors, and hardly goes a step from her threshold to cast away indescribable filth. Now, a good deal of this refuse is the remains of imperfect cooking—masses of soddened cabbage, part of which only is eaten, and the rest stored for the pig or thrown into the ditch. The place smells of soaking, saturated cabbage for yards and yards round about.

But it is much easier to condemn the cottage cook than to show her how to do better. It is even doubtful whether professed scientific cooks could tell her what to do. The difficulty arises from the rough, coarse taste of the labourer, and the fact, which it is useless to ignore, that he must have some

thing solid, and indeed, bulky. Thin clear soups—though proved to abound with nourishment and of delicious flavour—are utterly beside his wants. Give him the finest soup ; give him *pâtés*, or even more meaty *entrées*, and his remark will be that it is very nice, but he wants ‘summat to eat.’ His teeth are large, his jaws strong, his digestive powers such as would astonish a city man ; he likes solid food, bacon, butcher’s meat, cheese, or something that gives him a sense of fulness, like a mass of vegetables. This is the natural result of his training and work in the fields. The materials used by the cottage cook are often quite capable of being made into agreeable dishes, but then those dishes would not suit the man. All the soups and kickshaws—though excellent in themselves—in the world are not, for his purpose, equal to a round of beef or a side of bacon. Let any one go and labour daily in the field, and they will come quickly to the same opinion. Yet something might certainly be done in the way of preventing waste. The real secret lies in the education of the women when young—that is, for the future. But, taking the present day,

looking at things as they actually exist, it is no use abusing or lecturing the cottage cook. She might, perhaps, be persuaded to adopt a systematic plan of disposing of the refuse.

The Saturday half-holiday is scarcely so closely observed in rural labour as in urban. The work closes earlier, that is, so far as the day labourer is concerned, for he gets the best of this as of other things. But, half-holiday or not, cows have to be fed and milked, sheep must be looked after, and the stable attended to, so that the regular men do not get off much sooner. In winter, the days being short, they get little advantage from the short time ; in summer they do. Compensation is, however, as much as possible afforded to the settled men who have gardens, by giving them a half-day now and then when work is slack to attend to them.

On Sunday morning the labourer cleans and polishes his boots (after digging the potatoes for dinner), puts on a black or dark coat, puts his hands in his pockets—a marked feature this—and rambles down to his garden or the allotment. There, if it be spring or summer, he is sure to find some acquaintances

likewise 'locking round.' This seems to be one of the greatest pleasures of the labourer, noting the growth of a cabbage here, and the promise of potatoes yonder; he does not work, but strolls to and fro, discussing the vegetable prospect. Then back home in time for dinner—the great event of Sunday, being often the only day in the week that he can get a hot dinner in the middle of the day. It is his day at home, and though he may ramble out he never goes far.

Ladies residing in the country are accustomed to receive periodical appeals from friends in town asking their assistance in procuring servants. So frequent are such appeals that there would seem to be a popular belief that the supply is inexhaustible. The villages are supposed to be full of girls, all ready to enter service, and, though a little uncouth in manner, possessed nevertheless of sterling good qualities. The letter is usually couched in something like the following terms:—'Do you happen to know of a really good girl that would suit us? You are aware of the scale on which our household is conducted, and how very modest our requirements are. All

we want is a strong, healthy, honest girl, ready and willing to work and to learn, and who will take an interest in the place, and who will not ask too extravagant a price. She can have a good home with us as long as ever she likes to stay. My dear, you really cannot tell what a difficulty we experience in getting servants who are not "uppish," and who are trustworthy and do not mind working, and if you can find us one in those pretty villages round you, we shall be so much obliged,' &c.

The fact that a servant from the country is supposed, in the nature of things, to be honest and willing, hardworking, strong, and healthy, and almost everything else, speaks well for the general character of the girls brought up in agricultural cottages. It is, however, quite a mistake to suppose the supply to be limitless; it is just the reverse; the really good servants from any particular district are quickly exhausted, and then, if the friends in town will insist upon a girl from the country, they cannot complain if they do not get precisely what they want. The migration, indeed, of servants from the villages

to the towns has, for the time being, rather overdone itself. The best of those who responded to the first demand were picked out some time since ; many of those now to be had are not of the first class, and the young are not yet grown up. After a while, as education progresses—bringing with it better manners—there may be a fresh supply ; meantime, really good country girls are difficult to obtain. But the demand is as great as ever. From the squire's lady down to the wife of the small tenant-farmer, one and all receive the same requests from friends in town. The character of the true country servant stands as high as ever.

Let us hope that the polish of progress may not too much overlay the solid if humble virtues which procured that character for her class. Some efforts are being made here and there to direct the course of young girls after leaving the village schools—to put them in the right way and give them the benefit of example. As yet such efforts are confined to individuals. The object is certainly worth the formation of local organisations, for, too often, on quitting the school, the young village girl

comes in contact with anything but elevating influences, and, unfortunately, her own mother is not always the best guide. The position of a servant in town is well known, the antecedents of a girl before she reaches town perhaps not so thoroughly, while the lives of those who remain in the villages drop out of sight of the great world.

As a child, the cottage girl 'roughs' it in the road and in the fields. In winter she learns to slide, and to endure the cold and rain, till she often becomes what, to any one accustomed to a more delicate life, seems positively impervious to weather. The servants in old-fashioned farmhouses really did not seem to know what it was to feel cold. Even now-a-days, a servant fresh from an outlying hamlet, where her parents probably could procure but little fuel beyond what was necessary for cooking, at first cares not an atom whether there be a fire in the kitchen or not. Such girls are as hardy as the men of their native place. After a time, hot rooms and a profusion of meat and good living generally saps and undermines this natural strength. Then they shiver like town-bred people.

The cottage child is often locked out by her parents, who go to work and leave her in charge of her still smaller brothers and sisters. They play about the hedges and ditches, and very rarely come to any harm. In autumn their little fingers are employed picking up the acorns fallen from the oaks, for which the farmers pay so much per bushel. In spring is their happiest time. The joy of life—the warm sunshine and pleasant breeze of spring—is not wholly lost upon them, despite their hard fare, and the not very affectionate treatment they receive at home. Such a girl may then be seen sitting under a willow beside the brook, with her charges around her—the little brother that can just toddle, the baby that can but crawl and crow in the green fresh grass. Between them lies a whole pile of flowers—dandelion stems made into rings, and the rings joined together so as to form a chain, rushes plaited, blue-bells, cowslips tied up in balls, and cowslips loose, their yellow petals scattered over the sward.

The brook flows murmuring by, with an occasional splash, as a water-rat dives from the bank or a fish rises to an insect. The

children weave their flowers and chant some old doggrel rhymes with little or no meaning. Long afterwards that girl will retain an unconscious memory of the scene, when, wheeling her employer's children out on some suburban road, she seeks a green meadow and makes a cowslip ball for the delighted infants. In summer they go down to the hay-field, but dare not meddle with the hay, which the bailiff does not like to see disturbed ; they remain under the shadow of the hedge. In autumn they search for the berries, like the birds, nibbling the hips and haws, tasting crabs and sloes, or feasting on the fruit of a hazel-bush.

Be it spring or summer, autumn or winter, wherever the child may be, her eyes are ever on the watch to find a dead stick or a broken branch, too heavy to lift, but which may be dragged behind, in order to feed the cottage fire at night. That is her first duty as a child ; if she remains in the hamlet that will be her duty through life, and to the last, as an aged woman. So in London, round the purlieus of buildings in the course of erection—even in the central thoroughfares, in

busy Fleet Street—children hang about the temporary hoardings, and pick up the chips and splinters of deal. But the latter have not the pleasure of the blue-bells and cowslips, nor even of the hips and haws, nor does the fresh pure breeze play upon their foreheads.

Rough though it be, the childhood of the cottage girl is not without its recompenses, the most valuable of which is sturdy health. Now that good schools are open to every village, so soon as the children are old enough to walk the distance, often considerable, they are sent off every morning. At all events, if it does nothing else, it causes the mothers to give them a daily tidying up, which is in itself an advantage. They travel under the charge of the girl; often two or three such small parties join company, coming from as many cottages. In the warmer months, the lanes and fields they cross form a long playground for them, and picking flowers and searching for birds'-nests pass away the time. In winter they have to face the mire and rain.

When the girl leaves school she is hardly old enough to enter service, and too often in

the year or so that elapses before she 'goes out' much mischief is done. She is then at an age when the mind is peculiarly receptive, and the ways of the young labourers with whom she is thrown into contact are not very refined. Her first essay at 'service' is often as day-nursemaid at some adjacent farmhouse, taking care of the younger children in the day, and returning home to sleep. She then wanders with the children about the same fields she visited long before. This system used to be common enough, but latterly it has not worked well, because the parents expect the girl to progress so rapidly. She must be a woman and receive a woman's wages almost before she has ceased to be a girl. If she does not disdain to enter a farmhouse as kitchen-maid her wages will probably be about six pounds a year at first. Of course the exact sum varies very much in different localities and in different cases. It is but a small sum of money, yet it is often all she is worth.

The cottage is a poor preparation even for the humblest middle-class home. Those ladies in towns who have engaged country servants are well aware of the amount of teaching they

require before they can go through the simplest duties in a satisfactory manner. But most of these girls have already been out several times before reaching town. What a difficulty, then, the first farmer's wife must have had in drilling the rudiments of civilised life into them! Indeed, the vexations and annoyances connected with servants are no light weight upon the patience of the tenant-farmer. His wife is perpetually preparing servant girls for the service of other people.

She is a kind of unpaid teacher, for ever shaping the rough material which, so soon as it is worth higher wages than a tenant-farmer can usually pay, is off, and the business has to be begun over again. No one who had not seen it would believe how clumsy and unthinking such girls are on first 'going out.' It is, too, the flightiest and giddiest period of their existence—before the girl sobers down into the woman. In the houses of the majority of tenant-farmers the mistress herself has to be a good deal in the kitchen, and therefore comes into close personal contact with the servants, and feels these things acutely. Except in the case of gentlemen-farmers it may,

perhaps, be said that almost all the wives of farmers have had experience of this kind.

The girls are not nearly so tractable as formerly—they are fully aware of their own value and put it extremely high ; a word is sufficient, and if not pleased they leave immediately. Wages rise yearly to about the limit of twelve pounds. In mentioning that sum it is not set down as an exact figure, for circumstances of course vary in every case. But it is seldom that servants in farmhouses of the middle class receive more than that. Until recently few obtained so much. Most of them that are worth anything never rest till they reach the towns, and take service in the villas of the wealthy suburban residents. Some few, however, remain in the country from preference, feeling a strong affection for their native place, for their parents and friends. Notwithstanding the general tendency to roam, this love of home is by no means extinct, but shows itself very decidedly in some of the village girls.

The fogger, or milker, who comes to the farmhouse door in the morning may not present a very attractive appearance in the eyes

of those accustomed to see well-dressed people ; but it may be quite different with the young girl whose early associations have made her oblivious of dirt. She does not notice the bits of hay clinging to the smockfrock, the greasy hat, and begrimed face, or the clumsy boots thickly coated with mud. A kiss may be quite as sweet, despite these mere outside accidents. In her way she is full of imagination and fancy—what her mistress would call ‘giddy.’ Within doors an eye may be on her; so she slips out to the wood-stack in the yard, ostensibly to fetch a log for the fire, and indulges in a few moments of flirtation behind the shelter of the faggots. In the summer she works doubly hard in the morning, and gets everything forward, so that she may go out to the field haymaking in the afternoon, when she may meet her particular friend, and also, perhaps, his rival.

On Sundays she gladly walks two or more miles across the fields to church, knowing full well that some one will be lounging about a certain stile, or lying on the sward by a gate waiting for her. The practice of coquetry is as delightful in the country lane as in the

saloons of wealth, though the ways in which it exhibits itself may be rude in comparison. So that love is sometimes the detaining force which keeps the girl in the country. Some of the young labourers are almost heirs to property in their eyes. One is perhaps the son of the carrier ; who owns a couple of cottages let out to tenants ; or the son of the blacksmith, at whom several caps are set, and about whom no little jealousy rages. On the whole, servants in the country, at least at farmhouses, have much more liberty than they could possibly get in town.

The work is hard in the morning, but generally much less for the rest of the day ; in the evening there is often scarcely anything to do. So that the farmhouse servant has much time to herself, and is not too strictly confined indoors when not at work. There is a good deal of ‘company,’ too ; men coming to the door, men in the rick-yards and cattle-yards, men in the barn, labourers passing to their work, and so on. It is not so dull a life as might appear. Indeed, a farmhouse servant probably sees twice as many of her own class in the course of a week as a servant in town.

Vanity, of course, is not to be shut out even from so simple an existence : the girl must have a ' fashionable ' bonnet, and a pair of thin tight boots, let the lanes be never so dirty or the fields never so wet. In point of education they have much improved of late, and most can now read and write. But when they write home the letter is often read to the mother by some friend ; the girl's parents being nearly or quite illiterate. Tenant-farmers' wives are often asked to act as notaries in such cases by cottage women on the receipt of letters from their children.

When such a girl marries in the village she usually finds the work of the cottage harder than that of the farmhouse. It is more continuous, and when children arrive the trouble of nursing has to be added to the other duties, and to occasional work in the fields. The agricultural labourer's wife, indeed, has a harder lot than her husband. His toil is for the most part over when he leaves the field, but the woman's is never finished. When the man reaches home he does not care, or will not turn his hand to anything, except, perhaps, to fetch a pail of water, and

he is not well pleased if asked to do that. The want of conveniences like an accessible water supply is severely felt by the women in many villages and hamlets ; whilst in others there is a quantity running to waste. Many of the men obtain a more than liberal amount of beer, while the women scarcely get any at all. While working in the field they are allowed a small quantity by some farmers ; at home they have none.

Very few cottage women are inclined to drink, and they are seldom seen at 'public' or intoxicated. On Saturdays most of them walk into the nearest town, perhaps five or more miles distant, in order to buy household stuff. Often a whole bevy of neighbours then meet and return home together, and that is about the only time when they call at the roadside inn. Laden with heavy parcels, with a long walk yet before them, and after a hard week's work, it is not surprising that they should want some refreshment, but the quantity of ale then purchased is very small. When there are a number of young children, and the parents endeavour to keep them decent, the woman works very hard indeed.

Many farmers' wives take much interest in such families, where there is an evident endeavour to go straight, and assist the women in various ways, as with cast-off clothing for the children. A basketful of apples even from the farmer's orchard is a treat to the children, for, though better fed than formerly, their diet is necessarily monotonous, and such fruit as may be grown in the cottage garden is, of course, sold.

With the exception of vegetables the cottager now buys almost everything and produces nothing for home use; no home-spun clothing—not even a home-baked loaf. Instances have been observed where cottagers have gone to much expense (for them) to build ovens, and after baking a few batches abandoned the project. Besides the cheap outfitters in the towns, the pack-drapers come round visiting every cottage. Such drapers have no shop-window, and make no display, but employ several men carrying packs, who work through the villages on foot and range over a wide stretch of country.

Agricultural women, other than those belonging to the families of tenant-farmers, may

be summed up as employed in the following manner. Bailiffs' wives and daughters: these are not supposed, on extensive farms, to work in the field. The wife frequently has charge of the small home dairy, and the daughter assists at the house. Sometimes they also attend to the poultry, now occasionally kept in large numbers. A bailiff's daughter sometimes becomes housekeeper to a farmer. Dairymaids of the ordinary class—not competent to make special cheese—are becoming rarer, on account of the demand for their services decreasing—the milk trade and cheap foreign cheese having rendered common sorts of cheese unprofitable. They are usually cottagers. Of the married labouring women and the indoor servants something has already been said. In most villages a seamstress or two may be found, and has plenty of work to do for the farmers' families. The better class of housekeepers, and those professional dairymaids who superintend the making of superior cheese, are generally more or less nearly related to the families of tenant-farmers.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE LOW 'PUBLIC.' IDLERS.

THE wise old saw that good wine needs no bush does not hold true in the case of the labourer ; it would require a very large bush indeed to attract him to the best of beer offered for sale under legitimate conditions. In fact, he cares not a rap about good beer—that is, intrinsically good, a genuine product of malt and hops. He would rather grumble at it, unless, perchance, it was a gift ; and even then would criticise it behind the donor's back, holding the quart cup aslant so as to see the bottom in one place, and get a better view of the liquor. The great breweries whose names are household words in cities, and whose interest it is to maintain a high standard of quality for the delectation of their million consumers, do not exalt their garish painted advertisements in gilded letters as tall

as Tom Thumb over the doors of village ale-houses. You might call for Bass at Cairo, Bombay, Sydney, or San Francisco, and Bass would be forthcoming. But if you knocked the trestle-table with the bottom of a tankard (the correct way) in a rural public, as a signal to the cellar you might call for Bass in vain.

When the agricultural labourer drops in on his way home from his work of a winter evening—heralding his approach by casting down a couple of logs or bundle of wood which he has been carrying with a thud outside the door—he does not demand liquor of that character. When in harvest time, after sundown—when the shadows forbid further cutting with the fagging hook at the tall wheat—he sits on the form without, under the elm tree, and feels a whole pocketful of silver, flush of money like a gold digger at a fortunate rush, he does not indulge in Allsopp or Guinness. He hoarsely orders a 'pot' of some local brewer's manufacture—a man who knows exactly what he likes, and arranges to meet the hardy digestion of the mower and the reaper. He prefers

a rather dark beer with a certain twang faintly suggestive of liquorice and tobacco, with a sense of 'body,' a thickness in it, and which is no sooner swallowed than a clammy palate demands a second gulp to wash away the relics of the first. Ugh! The second requires a third swig, and still a fourth, and appetite increasing with that it feeds on, the stream rushes down the brazen throat that burns for more.

Like the Northern demi-god who drank unwittingly at the ocean from a horn and could not empty it, but nevertheless caused the ebb of the sea, so our toper, if he cannot contain the cask, will bring it down to the third hoop if time and credit will but serve. It would require a gauger's staff to measure his capacity—in fact, the limit of the labourer's liquor-power, especially in summer, has never yet been reached. A man will lie on his back in the harvest field, under a hedge sweet with the June roses that smile upon the hay, and never move or take his lips away till a gallon has entered into his being, for it can hardly be said to be swallowed. Two gallons a day is not an uncommon consumption

with men who swing the scythe or reaping-hook.

This of course is small beer ; but the stuff called for at the low public in the village, or by the road just outside, though indescribably nauseous to a non-vitiated palate, is not 'small.' It is a heady liquid, which if any one drinks, not being accustomed to it, will leave its effects upon him for hours afterwards. But this is what the labourer likes. He prefers something that he can feel ; something that, if sufficiently indulged in, will make even his thick head spin and his temples ache next morning. Then he has had the value of his money. So that really good ale would require a very large bush indeed before it attracted his custom.

It is a marked feature of labouring life that the respectable inn of the village, at which the travelling farmer, or even persons higher in rank, occasionally call, which has a decent stable, and whose liquors are of a genuine character, is almost deserted by the men who seek the reeking tap of the ill-favoured public which forms the clubhouse of all the vice of the village. While the farmer or passing

stranger, calling at the decent house really for refreshment, drinks but a glass or two and departs, the frequenters of the low place never quit their seats till the law compels them, so that for sixpence spent in the one by men with cheque-books in their pockets, five shillings are spent in the other by men who have not got a loaf of bread at home for their half-starving children and pinched wife. To an unprincipled landlord clearly this sort of custom is decidedly preferable, and thus it is that these places are a real hardship to the licensed victualler whose effort it is to keep an orderly house.

The influence of the low public upon the agricultural labourer's life is incalculable—it is his club, almost his home. There he becomes brutalised ; there he spends his all ; and if he awakes to the wretched state of his own family at last, instead of remembering that it is his own act, he turns round, accuses the farmer of starvation wages, shouts for what is really Communism, and perhaps even in his sullen rage descends to crime. Let us go with him into such a rural den.

Beware that you do not knock your head

against the smoke-blackened beams of the low ceiling, and do not put your elbow carelessly on the deal table, stained with spilled ale, left uncleared from last night, together with little heaps of ashes, tapped out from pipes, and spots of grease from the tallow candles. The old-fashioned settles which gave so cosy an air in the olden time to the inn room, and which still linger in some of the houses, are not here—merely forms and cheap chairs. A great pot hangs over the fire, for the family cooking is done in the public apartment ; but do not ask to join in the meal, for though the food may be more savoury than is dreamed of in your philosophy, the two-grained forks have not been cleaned these many a day. Neither is the butcher's wooden skewer, just extracted from the meat, an elegant tooth-pick if you are fastidious.

But these things are trifles when the dish is a plump pheasant, jugged hare, brown partridges, or trout—perhaps not exactly in season—as the chance may be ; or a couple of boiled fowls, or a turkey, or some similar toothsome morsel. Perhaps it is the gamey taste thus induced that enables them to enjoy

joints from the butcher which are downright tainted, for it is characteristic of the place and people on the one hand to dine on the very best, as above, and yet to higggle over a half-penny a pound at the shop. Nowhere else in all the parish, from the polished mahogany at the squire's mansion to the ancient solid oaken table at the substantial old-fashioned farmer's, can there be found such a constant supply of food usually considered as almost the privilege of the rich. Bacon, it is true, they eat of the coarsest kind ; but with it eggs new laid and delicious. In brief, it is the strangest hodge-podge of pheasant and bread and cheese, asparagus and cabbage. But somehow, whatever is good, whatever is held in estimation, makes its appearance in that grimy little back room on that ragged, dirty table-cloth.

Who pays for these things ? Are they paid for at all ? There is no licensed dealer in game in the village nor within many miles, and it seems passing strange. But there are other things almost as curious. The wood pile in the back yard is ever high and bulky ; let the fire burn never so clear in the frosty days there is always a regular supply of

firewood. It is the same with coal. Yet there is no copse attached to the place, nor is the landlord ever seen chopping for himself, nor are the farmers in the habit of receiving large orders for logs and faggots. By the power of some magic spell all things drift hitherward. A magnet which will draw logs of timber and faggots half across the parish, which will pull pheasants off their perch, extract trout from the deep, and stay the swift hare in midst of her career, is a power indeed to be envied. Had any enchanter of mediæval days so potent a charm?

Perhaps it is the engaging and attractive character of the landlord himself. He is a tall, lanky man, usually seen in slippers, and trousers too short for his limbs; he 'slop-pets' about in his waistcoat and shirt-sleeves, hands in pockets, and shoulders forward almost in a hump. He hangs about the place, now bringing in a log, now carrying a bucket, now spinning a mop, now slouching down the garden to feed the numerous fowls that scratch around the stumps of cabbages. Anything, in short, but work. Sometimes, however, he takes the trap and

horse, and is supposed to be gone on a dealing expedition. Sometimes it is only to carry a jar of beer up to the men in the field, and to mouch a good armful of fresh-cut clover for provender from the swathe. He sips gin the live-long day—weak gin always—every hour from morn till a cruel Legislature compels the closing of the shutters. He is never intoxicated—it is simply a habit, a sort of fuel to feed the low cunning in which his soul delights. So far from intoxication is he, that there is a fable of some hard knocks and ill usage, and even of a thick head being beaten against the harder stones of the courtyard behind, when the said thick head was helpless from much ale. Such matters are hushed up in the dark places of the earth. So far from intoxication is he, that he has the keenest eye to business.

There is a lone rick-yard up in the fields yonder to which the carters come from the farm far away to fetch hay, and straw, and so forth. They halt at the public, and are noticed to enjoy good living there, nor are they asked for their score. A few trusses of hay, or bundles of straw, a bushel of corn, or some

such trifle is left behind merely out of good fellowship. Waggon come up laden with tons of coal for the farms miles above, far from a railway station ; three or four teams, perhaps, one after the other. Just a knob or two can scarcely be missed, and a little of the small in a sack-bag. The bundles of wood thrown down at the door by the labourers as they enter are rarely picked up again ; they disappear, and the hearth at home is cold. The foxes are blamed for the geese and the chickens, and the hunt execrated for not killing enough cubs, but Reynard is not always guilty. Eggs and poultry vanish. The shepherds have ample opportunities for disposing of a few spare lambs to a general dealer whose trap is handy. Certainly, continuous gin does not chill the faculties.

If a can of ale is left in the outhouse at the back and happens to be found by a few choice spirits at the hour when the vicar is just commencing his sermon in church on Sunday, it is by the purest accident. The turnip and swede greens left at the door, picked wholesale from the farmers' fields ;

the potatoes produced from coat pockets by fingers which have been sorting heaps at the farmstead ; the apples which would have been crushed under foot if the labourers had not considerately picked them up—all these and scores of other matters scarce worth naming find their way over that threshold. Perhaps the man is genial, his manners enticing, his stories amusing, his jokes witty. Not at all. He is a silent fellow, scarce opening his mouth except to curse the poor scrub of a maid servant, or to abuse a man who has not paid his score. He slinks in and lights his pipe, smokes it silently, and slinks out again. He is the octopus of the hamlet, fastening on the cottage homes and sucking the life-blood from them. He misses nothing, and nothing comes amiss to him.

His wife, perhaps, then, may be the centre of attraction ? She is a short, stout woman, whose cheeks as she walks wobble with fat, whose face is ever dirty, and dress (at home) slatternly. But mayhap her heart is in the right place, and when Hodge is missed from his accustomed seat by the fire of an evening, when it is bruited abroad that he is down

with illness, hurriedly slips on her bonnet, and saying nothing, carries a basket of good things to cheer the inner man? Or, when his wife is confined, perhaps she brings some little delicacies, a breast of pheasant, a bottle of port wine, and strengthens her with motherly counsel in the hour of her travail. Is this so? Hodge's wife could tell you that the cottage door has never been darkened by her presence: that she indeed would not acknowledge her if passed by chance on the road. For the landlady sails forth to the adjacent town in all the glory of those fine feathers that proverbially make the fine bird.

It is a goodly spectacle to see her in rustling ample silk, in costly sealskin, in a bonnet 'loud' but rich, shading a countenance that glows ruddy red as a furnace. A gold chain encircles her portly neck, with a gold watch thereto attached; gold rings upon her fingers, in one of which sparkles a brilliant diamond; gold earrings, gold brooch, kid gloves bursting from the fatness of the fingers they encase. The dingy trap and limping raw-boned hack which carry her to the outskirts

of the town scarcely harmonise with so much glory. But at the outskirts she alights, and enters the street in full dignity. By some potent alchemy the sweat of Hodge's brow has become condensed into that sparkling diamond, which is disclosed when the glove is drawn off in the shops, to the admiration of all beholders.

Or, if not the wife, perhaps it may be the daughter who is the magnet that draws the very timber across the parish? She is not ill-looking, and might pass muster in her best dress were it not for a squareness of build, like the set of a man rather than the full curves associated with woman. She is rarely seen in the house at all, and neither talks to the men nor the women who enter. She sallies forth at night, and her friends are the scampish, among the sons of the lower class of tenant-farmers.

This is the family. How strange and yet how undeniable is it that such a house should attract the men whose self-interest, one would imagine, would lead them to shun it, and if they must spend their hard-won earnings, at least to get a good article for their money! It

proves that an appeal to reason is not always the way to manage the working man. Such a low house is always a nest of agitation : there the idle, drunken, and ill-conditioned have their rendezvous, there evil is hatched, and from there men take their first step on the road that leads to the gaol. The place is often crowded at night—there is scarcely room to sit or stand, the atmosphere is thick with smoke, and a hoarse roar of jarring voices fills it, above which rises the stave of a song shouted in one unvarying key from some corner. Money pours in apace—the draughts are deep, and long, and frequent, the mugs are large, the thirst insatiate. The takings, compared with the size and situation of the house, must be high, and yet, with all this custom and profit, the landlord and his family still grovel. And grovel they will in dirt, vice, low cunning, and iniquity—as the serpent went on his belly in the dust—to the end of their days.

Why do these places exist? Because in England justice is ever tempered with mercy ; sometimes with too much mercy. The resident squire and magistrate knows the extent of the

evil only too well. He sees it with his own eyes in the village ; he sees it brought before him on the bench ; the clergyman tells him of it, so do the gamekeeper and the policeman. His tenants complain of it. He is perpetually reminded of it, and of what it may ultimately mean as these places become the centres of communistic propagandas. But though perfectly aware of the evil, to suppress it is quite another matter.

First, you must find the power, and then, having the power, the question arises, is it wise to exercise it? Though the men who frequent such dens are often of the lowest type, or on their way to that condition, they are not all of that character. Men of a hard-working and honest stamp go there as well. All have their rights alike—rights and liberties which must be held sacred even at some disadvantage. In short, the reprobate nature of the place may be established, but while it is the chosen resort of the people, or of a section of them, unless some great and manifest harm arises it cannot be touched. The magistrate will willingly control it as far as lies in his province, but unless directly instructed by the

Legislature he cannot go farther. The truth is, it lies with the labourer himself. He is not obliged to visit there. A respectable inn may be found in every village if he desires that wholesome conviviality which, when it does not overstep certain bounds, forms a bond between man and man. Were such low houses suddenly put down, what an outcry would be raised of favouritism, tyranny, and so on ! When the labourer turns against them himself, he will speedily find powerful friends to assist in attaining the object.

If ever a man deserved a good glass of beer it is the agricultural labourer upon the conclusion of his day's work, exposed as he is to the wear and tear of the elements. After following the slow plough along the furrows through the mist ; after tending the sheep on the hills where the rain beats with furious energy ; after grubbing up the tough roots of trees, and splitting them with axe and wedge and mallet, a man may naturally ask for refreshment. And it is equally natural that he should desire to take it in the society of his fellows, with whom he can associate freely and speak his mind unchecked. The glass of ale

would not hurt him ; it is the insidious temptation proffered in certain quarters to do evil for an extra quart. Nothing forms so strong a temptation as the knowledge that a safe receiver is near at hand.

He must not be harshly judged because of the mere quantity he can take, for a quart of ale to him is really no more than a glass of wine to the 'City' gentleman who lives delicately. He is to be pitied rather than condemned, and aided out of the blunder rather than chastised. Punishment, indeed, waits upon him only too doggedly, and overtakes him too quickly in the shape of sorrows and privations at home. The evil lies not in the ale, but in the character of the man that sold him the ale, and who is, at the same time, the worst enemy of the legitimately-trading inn-keeper. No one, indeed, has better cause than the labourer to exclaim, 'Save me from my friends !' To do the bulk of the labourers bare justice it must be stated that there is a certain bluff honesty and frankness among them, a rude candour, which entitles them to considerable respect as a body. There are also men here and there whose strength of character

would certainly have obtained favourable acknowledgment had their lot been cast in a higher rank of life. But, at the same time, the labourer is not always so innocent and free from guile—so lamblike as it suits the purpose of some to proclaim, in order that his rural simplicity may secure sympathy. There are very queer black sheep in the flock, and it rather unfortunately happens that these, in more ways than one, force themselves, sometimes most unpleasantly, upon the notice of the tenant-farmer and the landlord.

A specimen or two may easily be selected from that circle of choice manhood whose head-quarters are at the low 'public.' A tall, well-built man stands forward, and at the first glance a stranger might take him for a favourable example. He holds himself more upright than most of his class, he is not ill-looking, and a marked air of deference towards those who address him conveys rather a pleasing impression. He can read fairly well and sign his name. This man, who is still young, began life as carter's lad, in which occupation he had not been long engaged before the horse-hair carefully accumulated as a perquisite

disappeared. Whiplash and similar small articles next vanished, and finally a handsome new whip. This last, not being so easily disposed of, was traced to his possession and procured him a sound thrashing. Some short time afterwards a carthorse was found in the fields stabbed in several places, though, fortunately, not severely. Having already the bad name that hangs the dog, he was strongly suspected of this dastardly act in revenge for the thrashing from the carter, and threat of dismissal from the employer. No evidence, however, could be procured, and though he was sent about his business he escaped punishment. As he grew older he fell in with a tribe of semi-gipsies, and wandered in their company for a year or two, learning their petty pilfering tricks. He then returned to agricultural labour, and, notwithstanding the ill-flavour that clung about his doings, found no difficulty in obtaining employment.

It is rare in agriculture for a man to be asked much about his character, unless he is to be put into a position of some trust. In trades and factories—on railways, too—an applicant for employment is not only ques-

tioned, but has to produce evidence as to his immediate antecedents at least. But the custom in farming prescribes no such checks ; if the farmer requires a man, the applicant is put on to work at once, if he looks at all likely. This is especially the case in times of pressure, as when there is a great deal of hoeing to be done, in harvest, and when extra hands are wanted to assist in feeding the threshing machine. Then the first that comes along the road is received, and scarcely a question asked. The custom operates well enough in one way, since a man is nearly sure of procuring employment, and encounters no obstacles ; on the other hand, there is less encouragement to preserve a good character. So the fellow mentioned quickly got work when he applied for it, and went on pretty steadily for a period. He then married, and speedily discovered the true use of women—i.e. to work for idle men. The moment he learnt that he could subsist upon her labour he ceased to make any effort, and passed his time lounging about.

The wife, though neither handsome nor clever, was a hard-working person, and sup-

ported herself and idle husband by taking in washing. Indignation has often been expressed at the moral code of savages, which permits the man to lie in his hammock while the woman cultivates the maize ; but, excepting the difference in the colour of the skin, the substitution of dirty white for coppery redness, there is really no distinction. Probably washing is of the two harder work than hoeing maize. The fellow 'hung about,' and doubtless occasionally put in practice the tricks he had acquired from his nomad friends.

The only time he worked was in the height of the harvest, when high wages are paid. But then his money went in drink, and drink often caused him to neglect the labour he had undertaken, at an important juncture when time was of consequence. On one such occasion the employer lost his temper and gave him a piece of his mind, ending by a threat of proceedings for breach of contract. A night or two afterwards the farmer's rick-yard was ablaze, and a few months later the incendiary found himself commencing a term of penal servitude. There he was obliged to work, began to walk upright, and acquired

that peculiarly marked air of deference which at first contrasts rather pleasantly with the somewhat gruff address of most labourers. During his absence the wife almost prospered, having plenty of employment and many kind friends. He signalled his return by administering a thrashing—just to re-assert his authority—which, however, the poor woman received with equanimity, remarking that it was only his way. He recommenced his lounging life, working occasionally when money was to be easily earned—for the convict stain does not prevent a man getting agricultural employment—and spending the money in liquor. When tolerably sober he is, in a sense, harmless ; if intoxicated, his companions give him the road to himself.

Now there is nothing exceptionally characteristic of the agricultural labourer in the career of such a man. Members of other classes of the working community are often sent to penal servitude, and sometimes men of education and social position. But it is characteristic of agricultural life that a man with the stigma of penal servitude can return and encounter no overpowering prejudice

against him. There are work and wages for him if he likes to take them. No one throws his former guilt in his face. He may not be offered a place of confidence, nor be trusted with money, as the upper labourers—carters for instance—sometimes are. But the means of subsistence are open to him, and he will not be driven by the memory of one crime to commit another.

There is no school of crime in the country. Children are not brought up from the earliest age to beg and steal, to utter loquacious falsehood, or entrap the benevolent with sham suffering. Hoary thieves do not keep academies for the instruction of little fingers in the art of theft. The science of burglary is unstudied. Though farmhouses are often situate in the most lonely places a case of burglary rarely occurs, and if it does, is still more rarely traced to a local resident. In such houses there is sometimes a good deal of old silver plate, accumulated in the course of generations—a fact that must be perfectly well known to the labouring class, through the women indoor-servants. Yet such attempts are quite exceptional. So, too, are robberies

from the person with violence. Serious crime is, indeed, comparatively scarce. The cases that come before the Petty Sessions are, for the most part, drunkenness, quarrelling, neglect or absenteeism from work, affiliation, petty theft, and so on.

The fact speaks well for the rural population ; it speaks very badly for such characters as the one that has been described. If he will not turn into the path of honest labour, that is his own fault. The injury he does is this, that he encourages others to be idle. Labouring men quit the field under the influence of temporary thirst, or that desire for a few minutes' change which is not in itself blameworthy. They enter the low 'public,' call for their quart, and intend to leave again immediately. But the lazy fellow in the corner opens conversation, is asked to drink, more is called for, there is a toss-up to decide who shall pay, in which the idle adept, of course, escapes, and so the thing goes on. Such a man becomes a cause of idleness, and a nuisance to the farmers.

Another individual is a huge, raw-boned, double-jointed giant of a man, whose muscular

strength must be enormous, but whose weakness is beer. He is a good workman, and of a civil, obliging disposition. He will commence, for instance, making drains for a farmer with the greatest energy, and in the best of tempers. A drain requires some little skill. The farmer visits the work day by day, and notes with approval that it is being done well. But about the third or fourth day the clever workman, whose immense strength makes the employment mere child's play to him, civilly asks for a small advance of money. Now the farmer has no objection to that, but hands it to him with some misgiving. Next morning no labourer is to be seen. The day passes, and the next. Then a lad brings the intelligence that his parent is just recovering from a heavy drinking bout and will be back soon. There is the history of forty years!

The same incident is repeated once or twice a month all the year round. Now it is a drain, now hedge-cutting, now hoeing, now haymaking, and now reaping. Three or four days' work excellently performed; then a bed in a ditch and empty pockets. The man's really vast strength carries him through the

prostration, and the knocks and bangs and tumbles received in a helpless state. But what a life! The worst of it is the man is not a reprobate—not a hang-dog, lounging rascal, but perfectly honest, willing to oblige, harmless and inoffensive even when intoxicated, and skilful at his labour. What is to be done with him? What is the farmer to do who has only such men to rely on—perhaps in many cases without this fellow's honesty and good temper—qualities which constantly give him a lift? It is simply an epitome of the difficulties too commonly met with in the field—bright sunshine, good weather, ripe crops, and men half unconscious, or quite, snoring under a hedge! There is no encouragement to the tenant to pay high wages in experiences like this.

A third example is a rakish-looking lad just rising into manhood. Such young men are very much in demand, and he would not have the slightest difficulty in obtaining employment, yet he is constantly out of work. When a boy he began by summoning the carter where he was engaged for cuffing him, charging the man with an assault. It turned

out to be a trumpery case, and the Bench advised his parents to make him return and fulfil his contract. His parents thought differently of it. They had become imbued with an inordinate sense of their own importance. They had a high idea of the rights of labour; Jack, in short, was a good deal better than his master, and must be treated with distinguished respect. The doctrines of the Union countenanced the deduction; so the boy did not return. Another place was found for him.

In the course of a few months he came again before the Bench. The complaint was now one of wrongful dismissal, and a claim for a one pound bonus, which by the agreement was to have been paid at the end of the year if his conduct proved satisfactory. It was shown that his conduct had been the reverse of satisfactory; that he refused to obey orders, that he 'cheeked' the carters, that he ran away home for a day or two, and was encouraged in these goings on by the father. The magistrates, always on the side of peace, endeavoured to procure a reconciliation, the farmer even paid down the

bonus, but it was of no use. The lad did not return.

With little variations the same game has continued ever since. Now it is he that complains, now it is his new master ; but any way there is always a summons, and his face is as familiar in the court as that of the chairman. His case is typical. What is a farmer to do who has to deal with a rising generation full of this spirit ?

Then there are the regular workhouse families, who are perpetually applying for parochial relief. From the eldest down to the youngest member they seem to have no stamina ; they fall ill when all others are well, as if afflicted with a species of paralysis that affects body, mind, and moral sense at once. If the phrase may be used without irreverence, there is no health in them. The slightest difficulty is sufficient to send an apparently strong, hale man whining to the workhouse. He localises his complaint in his foot, or his arm, or his shoulder ; but, in truth, he does not know himself what is the matter with him. The real illness is weakness of calibre—a looseness of fibre. Many a labourer has an

aching limb from rheumatism, and goes to plough all the same ; many a poor cottage woman suffers from that prevalent agony, and bravely gets through her task, and keeps her cottage tidy. But these people cannot do it—they positively cannot. The summer brings them pain, the winter brings pain, their whole life is one long appeal *ad misericordiam*.

The disease seems to spread with the multiplication of the family : the sons have it, and the sons' sons after them, so much so that even to bear the name is sufficient to stamp the owner as a miserable helpless being. All human wretchedness is, of course, to be deeply commiserated, and yet it is exasperating to see one man still doing his best under real trouble, and another eating contentedly the bread of idleness when there seems nothing wrong except a total lack of energy. The old men go to the workhouse, the young men go, the women and the children ; if they are out one month the next sees their return. These again are but broken reeds to rely upon. The golden harvest might rot upon the ground for all their gathering, the grass wither and die as

it stands, without the touch of the scythe, the very waggons and carts fall to pieces in the sheds. There is no work to be got out of them.

The village, too, has its rookery, though not quite in the same sense as the city. Traced to its beginning, it is generally found to have originated upon a waste piece of ground, where some squatters settled and built their cabins. These, by the growth of better houses around, and the rise of property, have now become of some value, not so much for the materials as the site. To the original hovels additions have been made by degrees, and fresh huts squeezed in till every inch of space is as closely occupied as in a back court of the metropolis. Within the cottages are low pitched, dirty, narrow, and contracted, without proper conveniences, or even a yard or court.

The social condition of the inhabitants is unpleasant to contemplate. The young men, as they grow up, arrive at an exaggerated idea of the value of their parents' property—the cottage of three rooms—and bitter animosities arise between them. One is accused of having had his share out in money, another has got

into trouble and had his fine paid for him ; the eldest was probably born before wedlock ; so there are plenty of materials for recrimination. Then one, or even two of them bring home a wife, or at least a woman, and three families live beneath a single roof—with results it is easy to imagine, both as regards bickering and immorality. They have no wish to quit the place and enter cottages with better accommodation : they might rent others of the farmers, but they prefer to be independent, and, besides, will not move lest they should lose their rights. Very likely a few lodgers are taken in to add to the confusion. As regularly as clockwork cross summonses are taken out before the Bench, and then the women on either side reveal an unequalled power of abuse and loquacity, leaving a decided impression that it is six to one and half-a-dozen to the other.

These rookeries do not furnish forth burglars and accomplished pickpockets, like those of cities, but they do send out a gang of lazy, scamping fellows and coarse women, who are almost useless. If their employer does not please them—if he points out that a waste of time has taken place, or that something has

been neglected—off they go, for, having a hole to creep into, they do not care an atom whether they lose a job or not. The available hands, therefore, upon whom the farmers can count are always very much below the sum total of the able-bodied population. There must be deducted the idle men and women, the drunkards, the never satisfied, as the lad who sued every master; the work-house families, the rookery families, and those who every harvest leave the place, and wander a great distance in search of exceptionally high wages. When all these are subtracted, the residue remaining is often insufficient to do the work of the farms in a proper manner. It is got through somehow by scratch-packs, so to say—men picked up from the roads, aged men who cannot do much, but whose energy puts the younger fellows to shame, lads paid far beyond the value of the work they actually accomplish.

Work done in this way is, of course, incomplete and unsatisfactory, and the fact supplies one of the reasons why farmers seem disinclined to pay high wages. It is not because they object to pay well for hard work,

but because they cannot get the hard work. There is consequently a growing reliance upon floating labour—upon the men and women who tramp round every season—rather than on the resident population. Even in the absence of any outward agitation—of a strike or open movement in that direction—the farmer has considerable difficulties to contend with in procuring labour. He has still further difficulties in managing it when he has got it. Most labourers have their own peculiar way of finishing a job; and however much that style of doing it may run counter to the farmer's idea of the matter in hand, he has to let the man proceed after his own fashion. If he corrected, or showed the man what he wanted, he would run the risk of not getting it done at all. There is no one so thoroughly obstinate as an ignorant labourer full of his own consequence. Giving, then, full credit to those men whose honest endeavours to fulfil their duty have already been acknowledged, it is a complete delusion to suppose that all are equally manly.

CHAPTER IX.

THE COTTAGE CHARTER. FOUR-ACRE FARMERS.

THE songs sung by the labourer at the ale-house or the harvest home are not of his own composing. The tunes whistled by the plough-boy as he goes down the road to his work in the dawn were not written for him. Green meads and rolling lands of wheat—true fields of the cloth of gold—have never yet inspired those who dwell upon them with songs uprising from the soil. The solitude of the hills over whose tops the summer sun seems to linger so long has not filled the shepherd's heart with a wistful yearning that must be expressed in verse or music. Neither he nor the ploughman in the vale have heard or seen aught that stirs them in Nature. The shepherd has never surprised an Immortal reclining on the thyme under the shade of a hawthorn bush at sunny noontide ; nor has the plough-

man seen the shadowy outline of a divine huntress through the mist that clings to the wood across the field.

These people have no myths ; no heroes. They look back on no Heroic Age, no Achilles, no Agamemnon, and no Homer. The past is vacant. They have not even a 'Wacht am Rhein' or 'Marseillaise' to chaunt in chorus with quickened step and flashing eye. No ; nor even a ballad of the hearth, handed down from father to son, to be sung at home festivals, as a treasured silver tankard is brought out to drink the health of a honoured guest. Ballads there are in old books—ballads of days when the yew bow was in every man's hands, and war and the chase gave life a colour ; but they are dead. A cart comes slowly down the road, and the labourer with it sings as he jogs along ; but, if you listen, it tells you nothing of wheat, or hay, or flocks and herds, nothing of the old gods and heroes. It is a street ditty such as you may hear the gutter arabs yelling in London, and coming from a music hall.

So, too, in material things—in the affairs of life, in politics, and social hopes—the la-

bourer has no well-defined creed of race. He has no genuine programme of the future ; that which is put forward in his name is not from him. Some years ago, talking with an aged labourer in a district where at that time no 'agitation' had taken place, I endeavoured to get from him something like a definition of the wants of his class. He had lived many years, and worked all the while in the field ; what was his experience of their secret wishes ? what was the Cottage Charter ? It took some time to get him to understand what was required ; he had been ready enough previously to grumble about this or that detail, but when it came to principles he was vague. The grumbles, the complaints, and so forth, had never been codified. However, by degrees I got at it, and very simple it was :—Point 1, Better wages ; (2) more cottages ; (3) good-sized gardens ; (4) 'larning' for the children. That was the sum of the cottager's creed—his own genuine aspirations.

Since then every one of these points has been obtained, or substantial progress made towards it. Though wages are perhaps slightly

lower or rather stationary at the present moment, yet they are much higher than used to be the case. At the same time vast importations of foreign food keep the necessities of life at a lower figure. The number of cottages available has been greatly increased—hardly a landlord but could produce accounts of sums of money spent in this direction. To almost all of these large gardens are now attached. Learning for the children is provided by the schools erected in every single parish, for the most part by the exertions of the owners and occupiers of land.

Practically, therefore, the four points of the real Cottage Charter have been attained, or as nearly as is possible. Why, then, is it that dissatisfaction is still expressed? The reply is, because a new programme has been introduced to the labourer from without. It originated in no labourer's mind, it is not the outcome of a genuine feeling widespread among the masses, nor is it the heartbroken call for deliverance issuing from the lips of the poet-leader of a downtrodden people. It is totally foreign to the cottage proper—something new, strange, and as yet scarcely under-

stood in its full meaning by those who nominally support it.

The points of the new Cottage Charter are—(1) The confiscation of large estates ; (2) the subdivision of land ; (3) the abolition of the laws of settlement of land ; (4) the administration of the land by the authorities of State ; (5) the confiscation of glebe lands for division and distribution ; (6) the abolition of Church tithes ; (7) extension of the county franchise ; (8) education gratis, free of fees, or payment of any kind ; (9) high wages, winter and summer alike, irrespective of season, prosperity, or adversity. No. 6 is thrown in chiefly for the purpose of an appearance of identity of interest between the labourer and the tenant against the Church. Of late it has rather been the cue of the leaders of the agitation to promote, or seem to promote, a coalition between the labourer and the dissatisfied tenant, thereby giving the movement a more colourable pretence in the eyes of the public. Few tenants, however dissatisfied, have been deceived by the shallow device.

This programme emanated from no carter

or shepherd, ploughman or fogger. It was not thought out under the hedge when the June roses decked the bushes ; nor painfully written down on the deal table in the cottage while the winter rain pattered against the window, and, coming down the wide chimney, hissed upon the embers. It was brought to the cottage door from a distance ; it has been iterated and reiterated till at last some begin to think they really do want all these things. But with the majority even now the propaganda falls flat. They do not enter into the spirit of it. No. 9 they do understand ; that appeals direct, and men may be excused if, with a view which as yet extends so short a space around, they have not grasped the fact that wages cannot by any artificial combination whatever be kept at a high level. The idea of high wages brings a mass of labourers together ; they vote for what they are instructed to vote, and are thus nominally pledged to the other eight points of the new charter. Such a conception as the confiscation and subdivision of estates never occurred to the genuine labourers.

An aged man was listening to a graphic

account of what the new state of things would be like. There would be no squire, no parson, no woods or preserves—all grubbed for cabbage gardens—no parks, no farmers. ‘No farmers,’ said the old fellow, ‘then who’s to pay I my wages?’ There he hit the blot, no doubt. If the first four points of the new charter were carried into effect, agricultural wages would no longer exist. But if such a consummation depends upon the action of the cottager it will be a long time coming. The idea did not originate with him—he cares nothing for it—and can only be got to support it under the guise of an agitation for wages. Except by persistent stirring from without he cannot be got to move even then. The labourer, in fact, is not by any means such a fool as his own leaders endeavour to make him out. He is perfectly well aware that the farmer, or any person who stands in the position of the farmer, cannot pay the same money in winter as in summer.

Two new cottages of a very superior character were erected in the corner of an arable field, abutting on the highway. As left by the builders a more uninviting spot

could scarcely be imagined. The cottages themselves were well designed and well built, but the surroundings were like a wilderness. Heaps of rubbish here, broken bricks there, the ground trampled hard as the road itself. No partition from the ploughed field behind beyond a mere shallow trench enclosing what was supposed to be the garden. Everything bleak, unpromising, cold, and unpleasant. Two families went into these cottages, the men working on the adjoining farm. The aspect of the place immediately began to change. The rubbish was removed, the best of it going to improve the paths and approaches ; a quick-set hedge was planted round the enclosure. Evening after evening, be the weather what it might, these two men were in that garden at work—after a long day in the fields. In the dinner hour even they sometimes snatched a few minutes to trim something. Their spades turned over the whole of the soil, and planting commenced. Plots were laid out for cabbage, plots for potatoes, onions, parsnips.

Then having provided necessities for the immediate future they set about preparing for extras. Fruit trees—apple, plum, and

damson—were planted ; also some roses. Next beehives appeared and were elevated on stands and duly protected from the rain. The last work was the building of pigsties—rude indeed and made of a few slabs—but sufficient to answer the purpose. Flowers in pots appeared in the windows, flowers appeared beside the garden paths. The change was so complete and so quickly effected I could hardly realise that so short a time since there had been nothing there but a blank open space. Persons travelling along the road could not choose but look on and admire the transformation.

I had often been struck with the flourishing appearance of cottage gardens; but then those gardens were of old date and had reached that perfection in course of years. But here the thing seemed to grow up under one's eyes. All was effected by sheer energy. Instead of spending their evenings wastefully at 'public,' these men went out into their gardens and made what was a desert literally bloom. Nor did they seem conscious of doing anything extraordinary, but worked away in the most matter-of-fact manner, calling no

one's attention to their progress. It would be hard to say which garden of the two showed the better result. Their wives are tidy, their children clean, their cottages grow more cosy and homelike day by day ; yet they work in the fields that come up to their very doors, and receive nothing but the ordinary agricultural wages of the district.

This proves what can be done when the agricultural labourer really wants to do it. And in a very large number of cases it must further be admitted that he does want to do it, and succeeds. If any one when passing through a rural district will look closely at the cottages and gardens he will frequently find evidence of similar energy, and not unfrequently of something approaching very nearly to taste. For why does the labourer train honeysuckle up his porch, and the out-of-door grape up the southern end of his house ? Why does he let the houseleek remain on the roof ; why trim and encourage the thick growth of ivy that clothes the chimney ? Certainly not for utility, nor pecuniary profit. It is because he has some amount of appreciation of the beauty of flowers,

of vine leaf, and green ivy. Men like these are the real backbone of our peasantry. They are not the agitators ; it is the idle hang-dogs who form the disturbing element in the village.

The settled agricultural labourer, of all others, has the least inducement to strike or leave his work. The longer he can stay in one place the better for him in many ways. His fruit-trees, which he planted years ago, are coming to perfection, and bear sufficient fruit in favourable years not only to give him some variety of diet, but to bring in a sum in hard cash with which to purchase extras. The soil of the garden, long manured and dug, is twice as fertile as when he first disturbed the earth. The hedges have grown high, and keep off the bitter winds. In short, the place is home, and he sits under his own vine and fig-tree. It is not to his advantage to leave this and go miles away. It is different with the mechanic who lives in a back court devoid of sunshine, hardly visited by the fresh breeze, without a tree, without a yard of earth to which to become attached. The factory closes, the bell is silent, the hands are discharged ;

provided he can get fresh employment it matters little. He leaves the back court without regret, and enters another in a distant town. But an agricultural labourer who has planted his own place feels an affection for it. The young men wander and are restless ; the middle-aged men who have once anchored do not like to quit. They have got the four points of their own genuine charter ; those who would infuse further vague hopes are not doing them any other service than to divert them from the substance to the shadow.

Past those two new cottages which have been mentioned there runs a road which is a main thoroughfare. Along this road during the year this change was worked there walked a mournful procession—men and women on tramp. Some of these were doubtless rogues and vagabonds by nature and choice ; but many, very many, were poor fellows who had really lost employment, and were gradually becoming degraded to the company of the professional beggar. The closing of collieries, mines, workshops, iron furnaces, &c., had thrown hundreds on the mercy of chance

charity, and compelled them to wander to and fro. How men like these on tramp must have envied the comfortable cottages, the well-stocked gardens, the pigsties, the beehives, and the roses of the labourers !

If the labourer has never gone up on the floodtide of prosperity to the champagne wages of the miner, neither has he descended to the woe which fell on South Wales when children searched the dust-heaps for food, nor to that suffering which forces those whose instinct is independence to the soup-kitchen. He has had, and still has, steady employment at a rate of wages sufficient, as is shown by the appearance of his cottage itself, to maintain him in comparative comfort. The furnace may be blown out, and strong men may ask themselves, What shall we do next ? But still the plough turns up the earth morning after morning. The colliery may close, but still the corn ripens, and extra wages are paid to the harvest men.

This continuous employment without even a fear of cessation is an advantage, the value of which it is difficult to estimate. His wages are not only sufficient to maintain him, he can

even save a little. The benefit clubs in so many villages are a proof of it—each member subscribes so much. Whether conducted on a ‘sound financial basis’ or not, the fact of the subscriptions cannot be denied, nor that assistance is derived from them. The Union itself is supported in the same way; proving that the wages, however complained of, are sufficient, at any rate, to permit of subscriptions.

It is held out to the labourer, as an inducement to agitate briskly, that, in time, a state of things will be brought about when every man will have a small farm of four or five acres upon which to live comfortably, independent of a master. Occasional instances, however, of labourers endeavouring to exist upon a few acres have already been observed, and illustrate the practical working of the scheme. In one case a labourer occupied a piece of ground, about three acres in extent, at a low rental paid to the lord of the manor, the spot having originally been waste, though the soil was fairly good. He started under favourable conditions, because he possessed a cottage and garden and a pair of horses with

which he did a considerable amount of hauling.

He now set up as a farmer, ploughed and sowed, dug and weeded, kept his own hours, and went into the market and walked about as independent as any one. After a while the three acres began to absorb nearly all his time, so that the hauling, which was the really profitable part of the business, had to be neglected. Then, the ready money not coming in so fast, the horses had to go without corn, and pick up what they could along the roadside, on the sward, and out of the hedges. They had, of course, to be looked after while thus feeding, which occupied two of the children, so that these could neither go to school nor earn anything by working on the adjacent farms. The horses meantime grew poor in condition ; the winter tried them greatly from want of proper fodder ; and when called upon to do hauling they were not equal to the task. In the country, at a distance from towns, there is not always a good market for vegetables, even when grown. The residents mostly supply themselves, and what is raised for export has to be sold at wholesale prices.

The produce of the three acres consequently did not come up to the tenant's expectation, particularly as potatoes, on account of the disease, could not be relied on. Meantime he had no weekly money coming in regularly, and his wife and family had often to assist him, diminishing their own earnings at the same time; while he was in the dilemma that if he did hauling he must employ and pay a man to work on the 'farm,' and if he worked himself he could not go out with his team. In harvest time, when the smaller farmers would have hired his horses, waggon, and himself and family to assist them, he had to get in his own harvest, and so lost the hard cash.

He now discovered that there was one thing he had omitted, and which was doubtless the cause why he did not flourish as he should have done according to his calculations. All the agriculturists around kept live stock—he had none. Here was the grand secret—it was stock that paid: he must have a cow. So he set to work industriously enough, and put up a shed. Then, partly by his own small savings, partly by the assistance of the mem-

bers of the sect to which he belonged, he purchased the desired animal and sold her milk. In summer this really answered fairly well while there was green food for nothing in plenty by the side of little-frequented roads, whither the cow was daily led. But so soon as the winter approached the same difficulty as with the horses arose, i.e., scarcity of fodder. The cow soon got miserably poor, while the horses fell off yet further, if that were possible. The calf that arrived died; next, one of the horses. The 'hat' was sent round again, and a fresh horse bought; the spring came on, and there seemed another chance. What with milking and attending to the cow, and working on the 'farm,' scarcely an hour remained in which to earn money with the horses. No provision could be laid by for the winter. The live stock—the cow and horses—devoured part of the produce of the three acres, so that there was less to sell.

Another winter finished it. The cow had to be sold, but a third time the 'hat' was sent round and saved the horses. Grown wiser now, the 'farmer' stuck to his hauling, and only worked his plot at odd times.

In this way, by hauling and letting out his team in harvest, and working himself and family at the same time for wages, he earned a good deal of money, and kept afloat very comfortably. He made no further attempt to live out of the 'farm,' which was now sown with one or two crops only in the same rotation as a field, and no longer cultivated on the garden system. Had it not been for the subscriptions he must have given it up entirely long before. Bitter experience demonstrated how false the calculations had been which seemed to show—on the basis of the produce of a small allotment—that a man might live on three or four acres.

He is not the only example of an extravagant estimate being put upon the possible product of land: it is a fallacy that has been fondly believed in by more logical minds than the poor cottager. That more may be got out of the soil than is the case at present is perfectly true; the mistake lies in the proposed method of doing it.

There was a piece of land between thirty and forty acres in extent, chiefly arable, which chanced to come into the possession of a gen-

tleman, who made no pretence to a knowledge of agriculture, but was naturally desirous of receiving the highest rental. Up to that time it had been occupied by a farmer at thirty shillings per acre, which was thought the full value. He did not particularly want it, as it lay separated from the farm proper, and gave it up with the greatest alacrity when asked to do so in favour of a new tenant. This man turned out to be a villager—a blustering, ignorant fellow—who had, however, saved a small sum by hauling, which had been increased by the receipt of a little legacy. He was confident that he could show the farmers how to do it—he had worked at plough, had reaped, and tended cattle, and had horses of his own, and was quite sure that farming was a profitable business, and that the tenants had their land dirt cheap. He ‘knowed’ all about it.

He offered three pounds an acre for the piece at once, which was accepted, notwithstanding a warning conveyed to the owner that his new tenant had scarcely sufficient money to pay a year’s rent at that rate. But so rapid a rise in the value of his land quite

dazzled the proprietor, and the labourer—for he was really nothing better, though fortunate enough to have a little money—entered on his farm. When this was known, it was triumphantly remarked that if a man could actually pay double the former rent, what an enormous profit the tenant-farmers must have been making! Yet they wanted to reduce the poor man's wages. On the other hand, there were not wanting hints that the man's secret idea was to exhaust the land and then leave it. But this was not the case—he was honestly in earnest, only he had got an exaggerated notion of the profits of farming. It is scarcely necessary to say that the rent for the third half year was not forthcoming, and the poor fellow lost his all. The land then went begging at the old price, for it had become so dirty—full of weeds from want of proper cleaning—that it was some time before any one would take it.

In a third case the attempt of a labouring man to live upon a small plot of land was successful—at least for some time. But it happened in this way. The land he occupied, about six acres, was situated on the outskirts

of a populous town. It was moderately rented and of fairly good quality. His method of procedure was to cultivate a small portion—as much as he could conveniently manage without having to pay too much for assistance—as a market garden. Being close to his customers, and with a steady demand at good prices all the season, this paid very well indeed. The remainder was ploughed and cropped precisely the same as the fields of larger farms. For these crops he could always get a decent price. The wealthy owners of the villas scattered about, some keeping as many horses as a gentleman with a country seat, were glad to obtain fresh fodder for their stables, and often bought the crops standing, which to him was especially profitable, because he could not well afford the cost of the labour he must employ to harvest them.

In addition, he kept several pigs, which were also profitable, because the larger part of their food cost him nothing but the trouble of fetching it. The occupants of the houses in the town were glad to get rid of the refuse vegetables, &c. ; of these he had a con-

stant supply. The pigs, too, helped him with manure. Next he emptied ash-pits in the town, and sifted the cinders ; the better part went on his own fire, the other on his land. As he understood gardening, he undertook the care of several small gardens, which brought in a little money. All the rubbish, leaves, trimmings, &c., which he swept from the gardens he burnt, and spread the ashes abroad to fertilise his miniature farm.

In spring he beat carpets, and so made more shillings ; he had also a small shed, or workshop, and did rough carpentering. His horse did his own work, and occasionally that of others ; so that in half-a-dozen different ways he made money independent of the produce of his land. That produce, too, paid well, because of the adjacent town, and he was able to engage assistance now and then. Yet, even with all these things, it was hard work, and required economical management to eke it out. Still it was done, and under the same conditions doubtless might be done by others. But then everything lies in those conditions. The town at hand, the know-

ledge of gardening, carpentering, and so on, made just all the difference.

If the land were subdivided in the manner the labourer is instructed would be so advantageous, comparatively few of the plots would be near towns. Some of the new 'farmers' would find themselves in the centre of Salisbury Plain, with the stern trilithons of Stonehenge looking down upon their efforts. The occupier of a plot of four acres in such a position—many miles from the nearest town—would experience a hard lot indeed if he attempted to live by it. If he grew vegetables for sale, the cost of carriage would diminish their value; if for food, he could scarcely subsist upon cabbage and onions all the year round. To thoroughly work four acres would occupy his whole time, nor would the farmers care for the assistance of a man who could only come now and then in an irregular manner. There would be no villa gardens to attend to, no ash-pits to empty, no tubs of refuse for the pig, no carpets to beat, no one who wanted rough carpentering done. He could not pay any one to assist him in the cultivation of the plot.

And then, how about his clothes, boots and shoes, and so forth? Suppose him with a family, where would their boots and shoes come from? Without any wages—that is, hard cash received weekly—it would be next to impossible to purchase these things. A man could hardly be condemned to a more miserable existence. In the case of the tenant of a few acres who made a fair living near a large town, it must be remembered that he understood two trades, gardening and carpentering, and found constant employment at these, which in all probability would indeed have maintained him without any land at all. But it is not every man who possesses technical knowledge of this kind, or who can turn his hand to several things. Imagine a town surrounded by two or three thousand such small occupiers, let them be never so clever; where would the extra employment come from; where would be the ash-pits to empty? Where one could do well, a dozen could do nothing. If the argument be carried still further, and we imagine the whole country so cut up and settled, the difficulty only increases, because every man living (or starv-

ing) on his own plot would be totally unable to pay another to help him, or to get employment himself. No better method could be contrived to cause a fall in the value of labour.

The examples of France and China are continually quoted in support of subdivision. In the case of France, let us ask whether any of our stalwart labourers would for a single week consent to live as the French peasant does? Would they forego their white, wheaten bread, and eat rye bread in its place? Would they take kindly to bread which contained a large proportion of meal ground from the edible chestnut? Would they feel merry over vegetable soups? Verily the nature of the man must change first; and we have read something about the leopard and his spots. You cannot raise beef and mutton upon four acres and feed yourself at the same time; if you raise bacon you must sell it in order to buy clothes.

The French peasant saves by stinting, and puts aside a franc by pinching both belly and back. He works extremely hard, and for long hours. Our labourers can work as hard

as he, but it must be in a different way ; they must have plenty to eat and drink, and they do not understand little economies.

China, we are told, however, supports the largest population in the world in this manner. Not a particle is wasted, not a square foot of land but bears something edible. The sewage of towns is utilised, and causes crops to spring forth ; every scrap of refuse manures a garden. The Chinese have attained that ideal agriculture which puts the greatest amount into the soil, takes the greatest amount out of it, and absolutely wastes nothing. The picture is certainly charming.

There are, however, a few considerations on the other side. The question arises whether our labourers would enjoy a plump rat for supper ? The question also arises why the Six Companies are engaged in transshipping Chinese labour from China to America ? In California the Chinese work at a rate of wages absolutely impossible to the white man—hence the Chinese difficulty there. In Queensland a similar thing is going on. Crowds of Chinese enter, or have entered, the country eager for work. If the agriculture of China is so per-

fect ; if the sewage is utilised ; if every man has his plot ; if the population cannot possibly become too great, why on earth are the Chinese labourers so anxious to get to America or Australia, and to take the white man's wages ? And is that system of agriculture so perfect ? It is not long since the Chinese Ambassador formally conveyed the thanks of his countrymen for the generous assistance forwarded from England during the late fearful famine in China. The starvation of multitudes of wretched human beings is a ghastly comment upon this ideal agriculture. The Chinese yellow spectre has even threatened England ; hints have been heard of importing Chinese into this country to take that silver and gold which our own men disdained. Those who desire to destroy our land system should look round them for a more palatable illustration than is afforded by the great Chinese problem.

The truth in the matter seems to be this. A labourer does very well with a garden ; he can do very well, too, if he has an allotment in addition, provided it be not too far from home. Up to a quarter of an acre—in some

cases half an acre—it answers, because he can cultivate it at odd times, and so receive his weekly wages without interruption. But when the plot exceeds what he can cultivate in this way—when he has to give whole weeks to it—then, of course, he forfeits the cash every Saturday night, and soon begins to lose ground. The original garden of moderate size yielded very highly in proportion to its extent, because of the amount of labour expended on it, and because it was well manured. But three or four acres, to yield in like degree, require an amount of manure which it is quite out of a labourer's power to purchase; and he cannot keep live stock to produce it. Neither can he pay men to work for him; consequently, instead of being more highly cultivated than the large farms, such plots would not be kept so clean and free from weeds, or be so well manured and deeply ploughed as the fields of the regular agriculturist.

CHAPTER X.

LANDLORDS' DIFFICULTIES. THE LABOURER AS
A POWER. MODERN CLERGY.

THE altered tone of the labouring population has caused the position of the landlord, especially if resident, to be one of considerable difficulty. Something like diplomatic tact is necessary in dealing with the social and political problems which now press themselves upon the country gentleman. Forces are at work which are constantly endeavouring to upset the village equilibrium, and it is quite in vain to ignore their existence. However honestly he may desire peace and goodwill to reign, it is impossible for a man to escape the influence of his own wealth and property. These compel him to be a sort of centre around which everything revolves. His duties extend far beyond the set, formal lines—the easy groove of old times—and are concerned

with matters which were once thought the exclusive domain of the statesman or the philosopher.

The growth of a public opinion among the rural population is a great fact which cannot be overlooked. Some analogy may be traced between the awaking of a large class, hitherto almost silent, and the strange new developments which occur in the freshly-settled territories of the United States. There, all kinds of social experiments are pushed to the extreme characteristic of American energy. A Salt Lake City and civilised polygamy, and a variety of small communities endeavouring to work out new theories of property and government, attest a frame of mind escaped from the control of tradition, and groping its way to the future. Nothing so extravagant, of course, distinguishes the movement among the agricultural labourers of this country. There have been strikes ; indignation meetings held expressly for the purpose of exciting public opinion ; an attempt to experimentalise by a kind of joint-stock farming, labourers holding shares ; and a preaching of doctrines which savour much of Communism. There have

been marches to London, and annual gatherings on hill tops. These are all within the pale of law, and outrage no social customs. But they proclaim a state of mind restless and unsatisfied, striving for something new, and not exactly knowing what.

Without a vote for the most part, without an all-embracing organisation—for the Union is somewhat limited in extent—with few newspapers expressing their views, with still fewer champions in the upper ranks, the agricultural labourers have become in a sense a power in the land. It is a power that is felt rather individually than collectively—it affects isolated places, but these in the aggregate reach importance. This power presses on the landlord—the resident country gentleman—upon one side; upon the other, the dissatisfied tenant-farmers present a rugged front.

As a body the tenant-farmers are loyal to their landlords—in some cases enthusiastically loyal. It cannot, however, be denied that this is not universal. There are men who, though unable to put forth a substantial grievance, are ceaselessly agitating. The landlord, in view of unfavourable seasons, remits a per-

centage of rent. He relaxes certain clauses in leases, he reduces the ground game, he shows a disposition to meet reasonable, and even unreasonable, demands. It is useless. There exists a class of tenant-farmers who are not to be satisfied with the removal of grievances in detail. They are animated by a principle—something far beyond such trifles. Unconsciously, no doubt, in many cases that principle approximates very nearly to the doctrine proclaimed in so many words by the communistic circles of cities. It amounts to a total abolition of the present system of land tenure. The dissatisfied tenant does not go so far as minute subdivisions of land into plots of a few acres. He pauses at the moderate and middle way which would make the tenant of three or four hundred acres the owner of the soil. In short he would step into the landlord's place.

Of course, many do not go so far as this ; still there is a class of farmers who are for ever writing to the papers, making speeches, protesting, and so on, till the landlord feels that, do what he may, he will be severely criticised. Even if personally insulted he

must betray no irritation, or desire to part with the tenant, lest he be accused of stifling opinion. Probably no man in England is so systematically browbeaten all round as the country gentleman. Here are two main divisions—one on each side—ever pressing upon him, and, besides these, there are other forces at work. A village, in fact, at the present day, is often a perfect battle-ground of struggling parties.

When the smouldering labour difficulty comes to a point in any particular district the representatives of the labourers lose no time in illustrating the cottager's case by contrast with the landlord's position. He owns so many thousand acres, producing an income of so many thousand pounds. Hodge, who has just received notice of a reduction of a shilling per week, survives on bacon and cabbage. Most mansions have a small home farm attached, where, of course, some few men are employed in the direct service of the landlord. This home farm becomes the bone of contention. Here, they say, is a man with many thousands a year; who, in the midst of bitter wintry weather, has struck a

shilling a week off the wages of his poor labourers. But the fact is that the landlord's representative—his steward—has been forced to this step by the action and opinion of the tenant-farmers.

The argument is very cogent and clear. They say, 'We pay a rent which is almost as much as the land will bear; we suffer by foreign competition, bad seasons and so on, the market is falling, and we are compelled to reduce our labour expenditure. But then our workmen say that at the home farm the wages paid are a shilling or two higher, and therefore they will not accept a reduction. Now you must reduce your wages or your tenants must suffer.' It is like a tradesman with a large independent income giving his workmen high wages out of that independent income, whilst other tradesmen, who have only their business to rely on, are compelled by this example to pay more than they can afford. This is obviously an unjust and even cruel thing. Consequently though a landlord may possess an income of many thousands, he cannot without downright injustice to his tenants, pay his immediate *employés*

more than those tenants find it possible to pay.

Such is the simple explanation of what has been described as a piece of terrible tyranny. The very reduction of rent made by the landlord to the tenant is seized as a proof by the labourer that the farmer, having less now to pay, can afford to give him more money. Thus the last move of the labour party has been to urge the tenant-farmer to endeavour to become his own landlord. On the one hand, certain dissatisfied tenants have made use of the labour agitation to bring pressure upon the landlord to reduce rent, and grant this and that privilege. They have done their best, and in great part succeeded, in getting up a cry that rent must come down, that the landlord's position must be altered, and so forth. On the other hand, the labour party try to use the dissatisfied tenant as a fulcrum by means of which to bring their lever to bear upon the landlord. Both together, by every possible method, endeavour to enlist popular sympathy against him.

There exists a party in cities who are animated by the most extraordinary rancour

against landlords without exception—good, bad, and indifferent—just because they are landlords. This party welcomes the agitating labourer and the discontented tenant with open arms, and the chorus swells still louder. Now the landlords, as a body, are quite aware of the difficulties under which farming has been conducted of late, and exhibit a decided inclination to meet and assist the tenant. But it by no means suits the agitator to admit this ; he would of the two rather the landlord showed an impracticable disposition, in order that there might be grounds for violent declamation.

Fortunately there is a solid substratum of tenants whose sound common sense prevents them from listening to the rather enchanting cry, ‘ Every man his own landlord.’ They may desire and obtain a reduction of rent, but they treat it as a purely business transaction, and there lies all the difference. They do not make the shilling an acre less the groundwork of a revolution ; because ten per cent. is remitted at the audit they do not cry for confiscation. But it is characteristic of common sense to remain silent, as it is of

extravagance to make a noise. Thus the opinion of the majority of tenants is not heard ; but the restless minority write and speak ; the agitating labourer, through his agent, writes and speaks, and the anti-landlord party in cities write and speak. A pleasant position for the landlord this ! Anxious to meet reasonable wishes, he is confronted with unreasonable demands, and abused all round.

Besides the labour difficulty, which has been so blazed abroad as to obscure the rest, there are really many other questions agitating the village. The school erected under the Education Act, whilst it is doing good work, is at the same time in many cases a scene of conflict. The landlord can hardly remain aloof, try how he will, because his larger tenants are so closely interested. He has probably given the land and subscribed heavily—a school board has been avoided ; but, of course, there is a committee of management, which is composed of members of every party and religious denomination. That is fair enough, and the actual work accomplished is really very good. But, if outwardly peace, it is inwardly contention. First, the agitating

labourer is strongly of opinion that, besides giving the land and subscribing, and paying a large voluntary rate, the landlord ought to defray the annual expenses and save him the weekly pence. The sectarian bodies, though neutralised by their own divisions, are ill-affected behind their mask, and would throw it off if they got the opportunity. The one thing, and the one thing only, that keeps them quiet is the question of expense. Suppose by a united effort—and probably on a poll of the parish the chapel-goers in mere numbers would exceed the church people—they shake off the landlord and his party, and proceed to a school board as provided by the Act? Well, then they must find the annual expenses, and these must be raised by a rate.

Now at present the cottager loudly grumbles because he is asked to contribute a few coppers; but suppose he were called upon to pay a heavy rate? Possibly he might in such a case turn round against his present leaders, and throw them overboard in disgust. Seeing this possibility all too clearly, the sectarian bodies remain quiescent. They have no real grievance, because their prejudices are

carefully respected ; but it is not the nature of men to prefer being governed, even to their good, to governing. Consequently, though no battle royal takes place, it is a mistake to suppose that because 'education' is now tolerably quiet there is universal satisfaction. Just the reverse is true, and under the surface there is a constant undermining process proceeding. Without any downright collision there is a distinct division into opposing ranks.

Another matter which looms larger as time goes on arises out of the gradual—in some cases the rapid—filling up of the village churchyards. It is melancholy to think that so solemn a subject should threaten to become a ground for bitter controversy ; but that much animosity of feeling has already appeared is well known. Already many village graveyards are overcrowded, and it is becoming difficult to arrange for the future. From a practical point of view there is really but little difficulty, because the landlords in almost every instance are willing to give the necessary ground. The contention arises in another form, which it would be out of place

to enter upon here. It will be sufficient to recall the fact that such a question is approaching.

Rural sanitation, again, comes to the front day by day. The prevention of overcrowding in cottages, the disposal of sewage, the supply of water—these and similar matters press upon the attention of the authorities. Out of consideration for the pockets of the ratepayers—many of whom are of the poorest class—these things are perhaps rather shelved than pushed forward ; but it is impossible to avoid them altogether. Every now and then something has to be done. Whatever takes place, of course the landlord, as the central person, comes in for the chief share of the burden. If the rates increase, on the one hand, the labourers complain that their wages are not sufficient to pay them ; and, on the other, the tenants state that the pressure on the agriculturist is already as much as he can sustain. The labourer expects the landlord to relieve him ; the tenant grumbles if he also is not relieved. Outside and beyond the landlord's power as the owner of the soil, as magistrate and *ex-officio* guardian, and so on, he cannot

divest himself of a personal—a family—influence, which at once gives him a leading position, and causes everything to be expected of him. He must arbitrate here, persuade there, compel yonder, conciliate everybody, and subscribe all round.

This was, perhaps, easy enough years ago, but it is now a very different matter. No little diplomatic skill is needful to balance parties, and preserve at least an outward peace in the parish. He has to note the variations of public opinion, and avoid giving offence. In his official capacity as magistrate the same difficulty arises. One of the most delicate tasks that the magistracy have had set them of recent years has been arbitrating between tenant and man—between, in effect, capital and labour. That is not, of course, the legal, but it is the true, definition. It is a most invidious position, and it speaks highly for the scrupulous justice with which the law has been administered that a watchful and jealous—a bitterly inimical party—ever ready, above all things, to attempt a sensation—have not been able to detect a magistrate giving a partial decision.

In cases which involve a question of wages or non-fulfilment of contract it has often happened that a purely personal element has been introduced. The labourer asserts that he has been unfairly treated, that implied promises have been broken, perquisites withheld, and abuse lavished upon him. On the opposite side, the master alleges that he has been made a convenience—the man staying with him in winter, when his services were of little use, and leaving in summer; that his neglect has caused injury to accrue to cattle; that he has used bad language. Here is a conflict of class against class—feeling against feeling. The point in dispute has, of course, to be decided by evidence, but whichever way evidence leads the magistrates to pronounce their verdict, it is distasteful. If the labourer is victorious, he and his friends ‘crow’ over the farmers; and the farmer himself grumbles that the landlords are afraid of the men, and will never pronounce against them. If the reverse, the labourers cry out upon the partiality of the magistrates, who favour each other’s tenants. In both cases the decision has been given according to law. But the knowledge that this

kind of feeling exists—that he is in reality arbitrating between capital and labour—renders the resident landlord doubly careful what steps he takes at home in his private capacity. He hardly knows which way to turn when a question crops up, desiring, above all things, to preserve peace.

It has been said that of late there has come into existence in the political world ‘a power behind Parliament.’ Somewhat in the same sense it may be said that the labourer has become a power behind the apparent authorities of the rural community. Whether directly, or through the discontented tenant, or by aid of the circles in cities who hold advanced views, the labourer brings a pressure to bear upon almost every aspect of country life. That pressure is not sufficient to break in pieces the existing order of things; but it is sufficient to cause an unpleasant tension. Should it increase, much of the peculiar attraction of country life will be destroyed. Even hunting, which it would have been thought every individual son of the soil would stand up for, is not allowed to continue unchallenged. Displays of a most disagreeable

spirit must be fresh in the memories of all; and such instances have shown a disposition to multiply. Besides the more public difficulties, there are also social ones which beset the landowner. It is true that all of these do not originate with the labourer, or even concern him, but he is dragged into them to suit the convenience of others. 'Coquetting with a vote' is an art tolerably well understood in these days; the labourer has not got a nominal vote, yet he is the 'power behind,' and may be utilised.

There is another feature of modern rural life too marked to be ignored, and that is the increased activity of the resident clergy. This energy is exhibited by all alike, irrespective of opinion upon ecclesiastical questions, and it concerns an inquiry into the position of the labourer, because for the most part it is directed towards practical objects. It shows itself in matters that have no direct bearing upon the Church, but are connected with the every-day life of the people. It finds work to do outside the precincts of the Church—beyond the walls of the building. This work is of a nature that continually

increases, and as it extends becomes more laborious.

The parsonage is often an almost ideal presentment of peace and repose. Trees cluster about it that in summer cast a pleasant shade, and in winter the thick evergreen shrubberies shut out the noisy winds. Upon the one side the green meadows go down to the brook, upon the other the cornfields stretch away to the hills. Footpaths lead out into the wheat and beside the hedge, where the wild flowers bloom—flowers to be lovingly studied, food for many a day-dream. The village is out of sight in the hollow—all is quiet and still, save for the song of the lark that drops from the sky. The house is old, very old; the tiles dull coloured, the walls grey, the calm dignity of age clings to it.

A place surely this for reverie—the abode of thought. But the man within is busy—full of action. The edge of the great questions of the day has reached the village, and he must be up and doing. He does not, indeed, lift the latch of the cottage or the farmhouse door indiscreetly—not unless aware that his presence will not be resented. He is anxious

to avoid irritating individual susceptibilities. But wherever people are gathered together, be it for sport or be it in earnest, wherever a man may go in open day, thither he goes, and with a set purpose beforehand makes it felt that he is there. He does not remain a passive spectator in the background, but comes as prominently to the front as is compatible with due courtesy.

When the cloth is cleared at the ordinary in the market town, and the farmers proceed to the business of their club, or chamber, he appears in the doorway, and quietly takes a seat not far from the chair. If the discussion be purely technical he says nothing; if it touch, as it frequently does, upon social topics, such as those that arise out of education, of the labour question, of the position of the farmer apart from the mere ploughing and sowing, then he delivers his opinion. When the local agricultural exhibition is proceeding and the annual dinner is held he sits at the social board, and presently makes his speech. The village benefit club holds its *fête*—he is there too, perhaps presiding at the dinner, and addresses the assembled men. He takes part

in the organisation of the cottage flower show; exerts himself earnestly about the allotments and the winter coal club, and endeavours to provide the younger people with amusements that do not lead to evil—supporting cricket and such games as may be played apart from gambling and liquor.

This is but the barest catalogue of his work ; there is nothing that arises, no part of the life of the village and the country side, to which he does not set his hand. All this is apart from abstract theology. Religion, of course, is in his heart ; but he does not carry a list of dogmas in his hand, rather keeping his own peculiar office in the background, knowing that many of those with whom he mingles are members of various sects. He is simply preaching the practical Christianity of brotherhood and good will. It is a work that can never be finished, and that is ever extending. His leading idea is not to check the inevitable motion of the age, but to tone it.

He is not permitted to pursue this course unmolested ; there are parties in the village that silently oppose his every footstep. If the battle were open it would be easier to win it,

but it is 'concealed. The Church is not often denounced from the housetop, but it is certainly denounced under the roof. The poor and ignorant are instructed that the Church is their greatest enemy, the upholder of tyranny, the instrument of their subjection, synonymous with lowered wages and privation, more iniquitous than the landowner. The clergyman is a Protestant Jesuit—a man of deepest guile. The coal club, the cricket, the flower show, the allotments, the village *fête*, everything in which he has a hand is simply an effort to win the good will of the populace, to keep them quiet, lest they arise and overthrow the property of the Church. The poor man has but a few shillings a week, and the clergyman is the friend of the farmer, who reduces his wages—the Church owns millions and millions sterling. How self-evident, therefore, that the Church is the cottager's enemy !

See, too, how he is beautifying that church, restoring it, making it light and pleasant to those who resort to it ; see how he causes sweeter music and singing, and puts new life into the service. This a lesson learnt from the City of the Seven Hills—this is the mark

of the Beast. But the ultimate aim may be traced to the same base motive—the preservation of that enormous property.

Another party is for pure secularism. This is not so numerous represented, but has increased of recent years. From political motives both of these silently oppose him. Nor are the poor and ignorant alone among the ranks of his foes. There are some tenant-farmers among them, but their attitude is not so coarsely antagonistic. They take no action against, but they do not assist, him. So that, although, as he goes about the parish, he is not greeted with hisses, the clergyman is full well aware that his activity is a thorn in the side of many. They once reproached him with a too prolonged reverie in the seclusion of the parsonage ; now they would gladly thrust him back again.

It may be urged, too, that all his efforts have not produced much visible effect. The pews are no more crowded than formerly ; in some cases the absence of visible effect is said to be extremely disheartening. But the fact is that it is yet early to expect much ; neither must it be expected in that direction. It is

almost the first principle of science that reaction is equal to action ; it may be safely assumed, then, that after a while these labours will bear fruit. The tone of the rising generation must perforce be softened and modified by them.

There exists at the present day a class that is morally apathetic. In every village, in every hamlet, every detached group of cottages, there are numbers of labouring men who are simply indifferent to church and to chapel alike. They neither deny nor affirm the primary truths taught in all places of worship ; they are simply indifferent. Sunday comes and sees them lounging about the cottage door. They do not drink to excess, they are not more given to swearing than others, they are equally honest, and are not of ill-repute. But the moral sense seems extinct—the very idea of anything beyond gross earthly advantages never occurs to them. The days go past, the wages are paid, the food is eaten, and there is all.

Looking at it from the purely philosophic point of view there is something sad in this dull apathy. The most pronounced materialist

has a faith in some form of beauty—matter itself is capable of ideal shapes in his conception. These people know no ideal. It seems impossible to reach them, because there is no chord that will respond to the most skilful touch. This class is very numerous now—a disheartening fact. Yet perhaps the activity and energy of the clergyman may be ultimately destined to find its reaction, to produce its effect among these very people. They may slowly learn to appreciate tangible, practical work, though utterly insensible to direct moral teaching and the finest eloquence of the pulpit. Finding by degrees that he is really endeavouring to improve their material existence, they may in time awake to a sense of something higher.

What is wanted is a perception of the truth that progress and civilisation ought not to end with mere material—mechanical—comfort or wealth. A cottager ought to learn that when the highest wages of the best paid artisan are reached it is *not* the greatest privilege of the man to throw mutton chops to dogs and make piles of empty champagne bottles. It might almost be said that one cause of the

former extravagance and the recent distress and turbulence of the working classes is the absence of an ideal from their minds.

Besides this moral apathy, the cottager too often assumes an attitude distinctly antagonistic to every species of authority, and particularly to that *prestige* hitherto attached to property. Each man is a law to himself, and does that which seems good in his own eyes. He does not pause to ask himself, What will my neighbour think of this? He simply thinks of no one but himself, takes counsel of no one, and cares not what the result may be. It is the same in little things as great. Respect for authority is extinct. The modern progressive cottager is perfectly certain that he knows as much as his immediate employer, the squire, and the parson put together with the experience of the world at their back. He is now the judge—the infallible authority himself. He is wiser far than all the learned and the thoughtful, wiser than the prophets themselves. Priest, politician, and philosopher must bow their heads and listen to the dictum of the ploughman.

This feeling shows itself most strikingly

in the disregard of property. There used to be a certain tacit agreement among all men that those who possessed capital, rank, or reputation should be treated with courtesy. That courtesy did not imply that the landowner, the capitalist, or the minister of religion, was necessarily in himself superior. But it did imply that those who administered property really represented the general order in which all were interested. So in a court of justice, all who enter remove their hats, not out of servile adulation of the person in authority, but from respect for the majesty of the law, which it is every individual's interest to uphold. But now, metaphorically speaking, the labourer removes his hat for no man. Whether in the case of a manufacturer or of a tenant of a thousand-acre farm the thing is the same. The cottager can scarcely nod his employer a common greeting in the morning. Courtesy is no longer practised. The idea in the man's mind appears to be to express contempt for his employer's property. It is an unpleasant symptom.

At present it is not, however, an active, but a passive force; a moral *vis inertiae*.

Here again the clergyman meets with a cold rebuff. No eloquence, persuasion, personal influence even, can produce more than a passing impression. But here again, perhaps, his practical activity may bring about its reaction. In time the cottager will be compelled to admit that, at least, coal club, benefit society, cricket, allotment, &c., have done him no harm. In time he may even see that property and authority are not always entirely selfish—that they may do good, and be worthy, at all events, of courteous acknowledgment.

These two characteristics, moral apathy and contempt of property—i.e., of social order—are probably exercising considerable influence in shaping the labourer's future. Free of mental restraint, his own will must work its way for good or evil. It is true that the rise or fall of wages may check or hasten the development of that future. In either case it is not, however, probable that he will return to the old grooves ; indeed, the grooves themselves are gone, and the logic of events must force him to move onwards. That motion, in its turn, must affect the rest of the community.

Let the mind's eye glance for a moment over the country at large. The villages among the hills, the villages on the plains, in the valleys, and beside the streams represent in the aggregate an enormous power. Separately such hamlets seem small and feeble—unable to impress their will upon the world. But together they contain a vast crowd, which, united, may shoulder itself an irresistible course, pushing aside all obstacles by mere physical weight.

The effect of education has been, and seems likely to be, to supply a certain unity of thought, if not of action, among these people. The solid common sense—the law-abiding character of the majority—is sufficient security against any violent movement. But how important it becomes that that common sense should be strengthened against the assaults of an insidious Socialism! A man's education does not come to an end when he leaves school. He then just begins to form his opinions, and in nine cases out of ten thinks what he hears and what he reads. Here, in the agricultural labourer class, are many hundred thousand young men exactly

in this stage, educating themselves in moral, social, and political opinion.

In short, the future literature of the labourer becomes a serious question. He will think what he reads ; and what he reads at the present moment is of anything but an elevating character. He will think, too, what he hears ; and he hears much of an enticing but subversive political creed, and little of any other. There are busy tongues earnestly teaching him to despise property and social order, to suggest the overthrow of existing institutions ; there is scarcely any one to instruct him in the true lesson of history. Who calls together an audience of agricultural labourers to explain to and interest them in the story of their own country ? There are many who are only too anxious to use the agricultural labourer as the means to effect ends which he scarcely understands. But there are few, indeed, who are anxious to instruct him in science or literature for his own sake.

CHAPTER XI.

A WHEAT COUNTRY.

THE aspect of a corn-growing district in the colder months is perhaps more dreary than that of any other country scene. It is winter made visible. The very houses at the edge of the village stand out harsh and angular, especially if modern and slated, for the old thatched cottages are not without a curve in the line of the eaves. No trees or bushes shelter them from the bitter wind that rushes across the plain, and, because of the absence of trees round the outskirts, the village may be seen from a great distance.

The wayfarer, as he approaches along the interminable road, that now rises over a hill and now descends into a valley, observes it from afar, his view uninterrupted by wood, but the vastness of the plain seems to shorten his step, so that he barely gains on the re-

ceding roofs. The hedges by the road are cropped—cut down mercilessly—and do not afford the slightest protection against wind, or rain, or sleet. If he would pause awhile to rest his weary limbs no friendly bush keeps off the chilling blast. Yonder, half a mile in front, a waggon creeps up the hill, always just so much ahead, never overtaken, or seeming to alter its position, whether he walks slow or fast. The only apparent inhabitants of the solitude are the larks that every now and then cross the road in small flocks. Above, the sky is dull and gloomy; beneath, the earth, except where some snow lingers, is of a still darker tint. On the northern side the low mounds are white with snow here and there. Mile after mile the open level fields extend on either hand; now brown from the late passage of the plough, now a pale yellow where the short stubble yet remains, divided by black lines; the low-cropped hedges bare of leaves. A few small fir copses are scattered about, the only relief to the eye; all else is level, dull, monotonous.

When the village is reached at last it is found to be of considerable size. The popu-

lation is much greater than might have been anticipated from the desert-like solitude surrounding the place. In actual numbers, of course, it will not bear comparison with manufacturing districts, but for its situation, it is quite a little town. Compared with the villages situate in the midst of great pastures—where grass is the all-important crop—it is really populous. Almost all the inhabitants find employment in the fields around, helping to produce wheat and barley, oats and roots. It is a little city of the staff of life—a metropolis of the plough.

Every single house, from that of the landowner, through the rent ; that of the clergyman, through the tithe—down to the humblest cottage, is directly interested in the crop of corn. The very children playing about the gaps in the hedges are interested in it, for can they not go gleaning ? If the heralds had given the place a coat of arms it should bear a sheaf of wheat. And the reason of its comparative populousness is to be found in the wheat also. For the stubborn earth will not yield its riches without severe and sustained labour. Instead of tickling it with a hoe, and

watching the golden harvest leap forth ; scari-fier and plough, harrow and drill in almost ceaseless succession, compel the clods by sheer force of iron to deliver up their treasure. In another form it is almost like the quartz-crushing at the gold mines—the ore ground out from the solid rock. And here, in addition, the ore has to be put into the rock first in the shape of manure.

All this labour requires hands to do it, and so—the supply for some time, at all events, answering the demand—the village teemed with men. In the autumn comes the ploughing, the couch-picking and burning, often second ploughing, the sowing by drill or hand, the threshing, &c. In the spring will come more ploughing, sowing, harrowing, hoeing. Modern agriculture has increased the labour done in the fields. Crops are arranged to succeed crops, and each of these necessitates labour, and labour a second and a third time. The work on arable land is never finished. A slackness there is in the dead of winter ; but even then there is still something doing—some draining, some trimming of hedges, carting manure for open field

work. But beyond this there are the sheep in the pens to be attended to as the important time of lambing approaches, and there are the horned cattle in the stalls still fattening, and leaving, as they reach maturity, for the butcher.

The arable agriculturist, indeed, has a double weight upon his mind. He has money invested in the soil itself, seed lying awaiting the genial warm rain that shall cause it to germinate, capital in every furrow traced by the plough. He has money, on the other hand, in his stock, sheep, and cattle. A double anxiety is his ; first that his crops may prosper, next that his stock may flourish. He requires men to labour in the field, men to attend to the sheep, men to feed the bullocks ; a crowd of labourers are supported by him, with their wives and families. In addition to these he needs other labour—the inanimate assistance of the steam-engine, and the semi-intelligent co-operation of the horse. These, again, must be directed by men. Thus it is that the corn village has become populous.

The original idea was that the introduction

of machinery would reduce all this labour. In point of fact, it has, if anything, increased it. The steam-plough will not work itself; each of the two engines requires two men to attend to it; one, and often two, ride on the plough itself; another goes with the water-cart to feed the boiler; others with the waggon for coal. The drill must have men—and experienced men—with it, besides horses to draw it, and these again want men. The threshing-machine employs quite a little troop to feed it; and, turning to the stock in the stalls, roots will not pulp or slice themselves, nor will water pump itself up into the troughs, nor chaff cut itself. The chaff-cutter and pump, and so on, all depend on human hands to keep them going. Such is but a very brief outline of the innumerable ways in which arable agriculture gives employment. So the labourer and the labourer's family flourish exceedingly in the corn village. Wages rise; he waxes fat and strong and masterful, thinking that he holds the farmer and the golden grain in the hollow of his hand.

But now a cloud arises and casts its shadow over the cottage. If the farmer depends upon

his men, so do the men in equal degree depend upon the farmer. This they overlooked, but are now learning again. The farmer, too, is not independent and self-sustained, but is at the mercy of many masters. The weather and the seasons are one master; the foreign producer is another; the markets which are further influenced by the condition of trade at large, form a third master. He is, indeed, very much more in the position of a servant than his labourer. Of late almost all these masters have combined against the corn-growing farmer. Wheat is not only low but seems likely to remain so. Foreign meat also competes with the dearly-made meat of the stalls. The markets are dull and trade depressed everywhere. Finally a fresh master starts up in the shape of the labourer himself, and demands higher wages.

For some length of time the corn-grower puts a courageous face on the difficulties which beset him, and struggles on, hoping for better days. After awhile, however, seeing that his capital is diminishing, because he has been, as it were, eating it, seeing that there is no prospect of immediate relief, whatever may

happen in the future, he is driven to one of two courses. He must quit the occupation, or he must reduce his expenditure. He must not only ask the labourer to accept a reduction, but he must, wherever practicable, avoid employing labour at all.

Now comes the pressure on the corn village. Much but not all of that pressure the inhabitants have brought upon themselves through endeavouring to squeeze the farmer too closely. If there had been no labour organisation whatever, when the arable agriculturist began to suffer, as he undoubtedly has been suffering, the labourer must have felt it in his turn. He has himself to blame if he has made the pain more acute. He finds it in this way. Throughout the corn-producing district there has been proceeding a gradual shrinkage, as it were, of speculative investment. Where an agriculturist would have ploughed deeper, and placed extra quantities of manure in the soil, with a view to an extra crop, he has, instead, only just ploughed and cleaned and manured enough to keep things going. Where he would have enlarged his flock of sheep, or added to the cattle in

the stalls, and carried as much stock as he possibly could, he has barely filled the stalls, and bought but just enough cake and foods. Just enough, indeed, of late has been his watchword all through—just enough labour and no more.

This cutting down, stinting, and economy everywhere has told upon the population of the village. The difference in the expenditure upon a solitary farm may be but a trifle—a few pounds ; but when some score or more farms are taken, in the aggregate the decrease in the cash transferred from the pocket of the agriculturist to that of the labourer becomes something considerable. The same percentage on a hundred farms would amount to a large sum. In this manner the fact of the corn-producing farmer being out of spirits with his profession reacts upon the corn village. There is no positive distress, but there is just a sense that there are more hands about than necessary. Yet at the same moment there are not hands enough ; a paradox which may be explained in a measure by the introduction of machinery.

As already stated, machinery in the field

does not reduce the number of men employed. But they are employed in a different way. The work all comes now in rushes. By the aid of the reaping machine acres are levelled in a day, and the cut corn demands the services of a crowd of men and women all at once, to tie it up in sheaves. Should the self-binders come into general use, and tie the wheat with wire or string at the moment of cutting it, the matter of labour will be left much in the same stage. A crowd of workpeople will be required all at once to pick up the sheaves, or to cart them to the rick; and the difference will lie in this, that while now the crowd are employed, say twelve hours, then they will be employed only nine. Just the same number—perhaps more—but for less time. Under the old system, a dozen men worked all the winter through, hammering away with their flails in the barns. Now the threshing machine arrives, and the ricks are threshed in a few days. As many men are wanted (and at double the wages) to feed the machine, to tend the ‘elevator’ carrying up the straw to make the straw rick, to fetch water and coal for the engine, to drive it, &c. But instead of

working for so many months, this rush lasts as many days.

Much the same thing happens all throughout arable agriculture—from the hoeing to the threshing—a troop are wanted one day, scarcely anybody the next. There is, of course, a steady undercurrent of continuous work for a certain fixed number of hands ; but over and above this are the periodical calls for extra labour, which of recent years, from the high wages paid, have been so profitable to the labourers. But when the agriculturist draws in his investments, when he retrenches his expenditure, and endeavours, as far as practicable, to confine it to his regular men, then the intermittent character of the extra work puts a strain upon the rest. They do not find so much to do, the pay is insensibly decreasing, and they obtain less casual employment meantime.

In the olden times a succession of bad harvests caused sufferings throughout the whole of England. Somewhat in like manner, though in a greatly modified degree, the difficulties of the arable agriculturist at the present day press upon the corn villages. In a time

when the inhabitants saw the farmers, as they believed, flourishing and even treading on the heels of the squire, the corn villagers, thinking that the farmer was absolutely dependent upon them, led the van of the agitation for high wages. Now, when the force of circumstances has compressed wages again, they are loth to submit. But discovering by slow degrees that no organisation can compel, or create a demand for labour at any price, there are now signs on the one hand of acquiescence, and on the other of partial emigration.

Thus the comparative density of the population in arable districts is at once a blessing and a trouble. It is not the 'pranks' of the farmers that have caused emigration, or threats of it. The farmer is unable to pay high wages, the men will not accept a moderate reduction, and the idle crowd, in effect, tread on each other's heels. Pressure of that kind, and to that extent, is limited to a few localities only. The majority have sufficient common sense to see their error. But it is in arable districts that agitation takes its extreme form. The very number of the population gives any movement a vigour and emphasis that is

wanting where there may be as much discontent but fewer to exhibit it. That populousness has been in the past of the greatest assistance to the agriculturist, and there is no reason why it should not be so in the future, for it does not by any means follow that because agriculture is at present depressed it will always be so.

Let the months roll by and then approach the same village along the same road under the summer sun. The hedges, though low, are green, and bear the beautiful flowers of the wild convolvulus. Trees that were scarcely observed before, because bare of leaves, now appear, and crowds of birds, finches and sparrows, fly up from the corn. The black swifts wheel overhead, and the white-breasted swallows float in the azure. Over the broad plain extends a still broader roof of the purest blue—the landscape is so open that the sky seems as broad again as in the enclosed countries—wide, limitless, very much as it does at sea. On the rising ground pause a moment and look round. Wheat and barley and oats stretch mile after mile on either hand. Here the red wheat tinges the view, there the whiter

barley ; but the prevailing hue is a light gold. Yonder green is the swede, or turnip, or man-gold ; but frequent as are the fields of roots, the golden tint overpowers the green. A golden sun looks down upon the golden wheat—the winds are still and the heat broods over the corn. It is pleasant to get under the scanty shadow of the stunted ash. Think what wealth all that glorious beauty represents. Wealth to the rich man, wealth to the poor.

Come again in a few weeks' time and look down upon it. The swarthy reapers are at work. They bend to their labour till the tall corn overtops their heads. Every now and then they rise up, and stand breast high among the wheat. Every field is full of them, men and women, young lads and girls, busy as they may be. Yonder the reaping machine, with its strange-looking arms revolving like the vast claws of an unearthly monster beating down the grain, goes rapidly round and round in an ever-narrowing circle till the last ears fall. A crowd has pounced upon the cut corn. Behind them—behind the reapers—everywhere abroad on the great plain rises an army, regiment behind regiment, the sheaves

stacked in regular ranks down the fields. Yet a little while, and over that immense expanse not one single, solitary straw will be left standing. Then the green roots show more strongly, and tint the landscape. Next come the waggons, and after that the children searching for stray ears of wheat, for not one must be left behind. After that, in the ploughing time, while yet the sun shines warm, it is a sight to watch the teams from under the same ash tree, returning from their labour in the afternoon. Six horses here, eight horses there, twelve yonder, four far away ; all in single file, slowly walking home, and needing no order or touch of whip to direct their steps to the well-known stables.

If any wish to see the work of farming in its full flush and vigour, let them visit a corn district at the harvest time. Down in the village there scarcely any one is left at home ; every man, woman, and child is out in the field. It is the day of prosperity, of continuous work for all, of high wages. It is, then, easy to understand why corn villages are populous. One cannot but feel the strongest sympathy with these men. The scene altogether seems

so thoroughly, so intensely English. The spirit of it enters into the spectator, and he feels that he, too, must try his hand at the reaping, and then slake his thirst from the same cup with these bronzed sons of toil.

Yet what a difficult problem lies underneath all this! While the reaper yonder slashes at the straw, huge ships are on the ocean rushing through the foam to bring grain to the great cities to whom—and to all—cheap bread is so inestimable a blessing. Very likely, when he pauses in his work, and takes his luncheon, the crust he eats is made of flour ground out of grain that grew in far distant Minnesota, or some vast Western State. Perhaps at the same moment the farmer himself sits at his desk and adds up figure after figure, calculating the cost of production, the expenditure on labour, the price of manure put into the soil, the capital invested in the steam-plough, and the cost of feeding the bullocks that are already intended for the next Christmas. Against these he places the market price of that wheat he can see being reaped from his window, and the price he receives for his fattened bullock. Then a vision rises before him

of green meads and broad pastures slowly supplanting the corn ; the plough put away, and the scythe brought out and sharpened. If so, where then will be the crowd of men and women yonder working in the wheat? Is not this a great problem, one to be pondered over and not hastily dismissed ?

Logical conclusions do not always come to pass in practice ; even yet there is plenty of time for a change which shall retain these stalwart reapers amongst us, the strength and pride of the land. But if so, it is certain that it must be preceded by some earnest on their part of a desire to remove that last straw from the farmer's back—the last straw of extravagant labour demands—which have slowly been dragging him down. They have been doing their very best to bring about the substitution of grass for corn. And the farmer, too, perhaps, must look at home, and be content to live in simpler fashion. To do so will certainly require no little moral courage, for a prevalent social custom, like that of living fully up to the income (not solely characteristic of farmers), is with difficulty faced and overcome.

CHAPTER XII.

GRASS COUNTRIES.

ON the ground beside the bramble bushes that project into the field the grass is white with hoar frost at noon-day, when the rest of the meadow has resumed its dull green winter tint. Behind the copse, too, there is a broad belt of white—every place, indeed, that would be in the shadow were the sun to shine forth is of that colour.

The eager hunter frowns with impatience, knowing that though the eaves of the house may drip in the middle of the day, yet, while those white patches show in the shelter of the bramble bushes the earth will be hard and unyielding. His horse may clear the hedge, but how about the landing on that iron-like surface? Every old hoof-mark in the sward, cut out sharp and clear as if with a steel die, is so firm that the heaviest roller would not

produce the smallest effect upon it. At the gateways where the passage of cattle has trodden away the turf, the mud, once almost impassable, is now hardened, and every cloven hoof that pressed it has left its mark as if cast in metal. Along the furrows the ice has fallen in, and lies on the slope white and broken, the shallow water having dried away beneath it. Dark hedges, dark trees—in the distance they look almost black—nearer at hand the smallest branches devoid of leaves are clearly defined against the sky.

As the northerly wind drifts the clouds before it the sun shines down, and the dead, dry grass and the innumerable tufts of the 'leaze' which the cattle have not eaten, take a dull grey hue. Sheltered from the blast behind the thick, high hawthorn hedge and double mound, which is like a rampart reared against Boreas, it is pleasant even now to stroll to and fro in the sunshine. The long-tailed titmice come along in parties of six or eight, calling to each other as in turn they visit every tree. Turning from watching these—see, a redbreast has perched on a branch barely two yards distant, for, wherever you

may be, there the robin comes and watches you. Whether looking in summer at the roses in the garden, or waiting in winter for the pheasant to break cover or the fox to steal forth, go where you will, in a minute or two, a redbreast appears intent on your proceedings.

Now comes a discordant squeaking of iron axles that have not been greased, and the jolting sound of wheels passing over ruts whose edges are hard and frost-bound. From the lane two manure carts enter the meadow in slow procession, and, stopping at regular intervals, the men in charge take long poles with hooks at the end and drag down a certain quantity of the fertilising material. The sharp frost is so far an advantage to the tenant of meadow land that he can cart manure without cutting and poaching the turf, and even without changing the ordinary for the extra set of broad-wheels on the cart. In the next meadow the hedge-cutters are busy, their hands fenced with thick gloves to turn aside the thorns.

Near by are the hay-ricks and cow-pen where a metallic rattling sound rises every

now and then—the bull in the shed moving his neck and dragging his chain through the ring. More than one of the hay-ricks have been already half cut away, for the severe winter makes the cows hungry, and if their yield of milk is to be kept up they must be well fed, so that the foggers have plenty to do. If the dairy, as is most probably the case, sends the milk to London, they have still more, because then a regular supply has to be maintained, and for that a certain proportion of other food has to be prepared in addition to the old-fashioned hay. The new system, indeed, has led to the employment of more labour out-of-doors, if less within. An extra fogger has to be put on, not only because of the food, but because the milking has to be done in less time—with a despatch, indeed, that would have seemed unnatural to the old folk. Besides which the milk carts to and fro the railway station require drivers, whose time—as they have to go some miles twice a day—is pretty nearly occupied with their horses and milk tins. So much is this the case that even in summer they can scarcely be spared to do a few hours' haymaking.

The new system, therefore, of selling the milk instead of making butter and cheese is advantageous to the labourer by affording more employment in grass districts. It is steady work, too, lasting the entire year round, and well paid. The stock of cows in such cases is kept up to the very highest that the land will carry, which, again, gives more work. Although the closing of the cheese lofts and the superannuation of the churn has reduced the number of female servants in the house, yet that is more than balanced by the extra work without. The cottage families, it is true, lose the buttermilk which some farmers used to allow them; but wages are certainly better.

There has been, in fact, a general stir and movement in dairy districts since the milk selling commenced, which has been favourable to labour. A renewed life and energy has been visible on farms where for generations things had gone on in the same sleepy manner. Efforts have been made to extend the area available for feeding by grubbing hedges and cultivating pieces of ground hitherto given over to thistles, rushes, and rough grasses.

Drains have been put in so that the stagnant water in the soil might not cause the growth of those grasses which cattle will not touch. Fresh seed has been sown, and 'rattles' and similar plants destructive to the hay crop have been carefully eradicated. New gates, new carts, and traps, all exhibit the same movement.

The cowyards in many districts were formerly in a very dilapidated condition. The thatch of the sheds was all worn away, mossgrown, and bored by the sparrows. Those in which the cows were placed at calving time were mere dark holes. The floor of the yard was often soft, so that the hoofs of the cattle trod deep into it—a perfect slough in wet weather. The cows themselves were of a poor character, and in truth as poorly treated, for the hay was made badly—carelessly harvested, and the grass itself not of good quality—nor were the men always very humane, thinking little of knocking the animals about.

Quite a change has come over all this. The cows now kept are much too valuable to be treated roughly, being selected from short-

horn strains that yield large quantities of milk. No farmer now would allow any such knocking about. The hay itself is better, because the grass has been improved, and it is also harvested carefully. Rickcloths prevent rain from spoiling the rising rick, mowing machines, haymaking machines, and horse rakes enable a spell of good weather to be taken advantage of, and the hay got in quickly, instead of lying about till the rain returns. As for the manure, it is recognised to be gold in another shape, and instead of being trodden under foot by the cattle and washed away by the rain, it is utilised. The yard is drained and stoned so as to be dry—a change that effects a saving in litter, the value of which has greatly risen. Sheds have been new thatched, and generally renovated, and even new roads laid down across the farms, and properly macadamised, in order that the milk carts might reach the highway without the straining and difficulty consequent upon wheels sinking half up to the axles in winter.

In short, dairy farms have been swept and garnished, and even something like science introduced upon them. The thermometer in

summer is in constant use to determine if the milk is sufficiently cooled to proceed upon its journey. That cooling of the milk alone is a process that requires more labour to carry it out. Artificial manures are spread abroad on the pastures. The dairy farmer has to a considerable extent awakened to the times, and, like the arable agriculturist, is endeavouring to bring modern appliances to bear upon his business. To those who recollect the old style of dairy farmer the change seems marvellous indeed. Nowhere was the farmer more backward, more rude and primitive, than on the small dairy farms. He was barely to be distinguished from the labourers, amongst whom he worked shoulder to shoulder; he spoke with their broad accent, and his ideas and theirs were nearly identical.

In ten years' time—just a short ten years only—what an alteration has taken place! It is needless to say that this could not go on without the spending of money, and the spending of money means the benefit of the labouring class. New cottages have been erected, of course on modern plans, so that many of the men are much better lodged than they

were, and live nearer to their work—a great consideration where cows are the main object of attention. The men have to be on the farm very early in the morning, and if they have a long walk it is a heavy drag upon them. Perhaps the constant intercourse with the towns and stations resulting from the double daily visit of the milk carts has quickened the minds of the labourers thus employed. Whatever may be the cause, it is certain that they do exhibit an improvement, and are much ‘smarter’ than they used to be. It would be untrue to say that no troubles with the labourers have arisen in meadow districts. There has been some friction about wages, but not nearly approaching the agitation elsewhere. And when a recent reduction of wages commenced, many of the men themselves admitted that it was inevitable. But the average earnings throughout the year still continue, and are likely to continue far above the old rate of payment. Where special kinds of cheese are made the position of the labourer has also improved.

Coming to the same district in summer time, the meadows have a beauty all their

own. The hedges are populous with birds, the trees lovely, the brook green with flags, the luxuriantly-growing grass decked with flowers. Nor has haymaking lost all its ancient charm. Though the old-fashioned sound of the mower sharpening his scythe is less often heard, being superseded by the continuous rattle of the mowing machine, yet the hay smells as sweetly as ever. While the mowing machine, the haymaking machine, and horse rake give the farmer the power of using the sunshine, when it comes, to the best purpose, they are not without an effect upon the labouring population.

Just as in corn districts, machinery has not reduced the actual number of hands employed, but has made the work come in spells or rushes ; so in the meadows the haymaking is shortened. The farmer waits till good weather is assured for a few days. Then on goes his mowing machine and levels the crop of an entire field in no time. Immediately a whole crowd of labourers are required for making the hay and getting it when ready on the waggons. Under the old system the mowers usually got drunk about the third

day of sunshine, and the work came to a standstill. When it began to rain they recovered themselves, and slashed away vigorously—when it was not wanted. The effect of machinery has been much the same as on corn lands, with the addition that fewer women are now employed in haymaking. Those that are employed are much better paid.

The hamlets of grass districts are not, as a rule, at all populous. There really are fewer people, and at the same time the impression is increased by the scattered position of the dwellings. Instead of a great central village there are three or four small hamlets a mile or two apart, and solitary groups of cottages near farmhouses. One result of this is, that allotment gardens are not so common, for the sufficient reason that, if a field were set apart for the purpose, the tenants of the plots would have to walk so far to the place that it would scarcely pay them. Gardens are consequently attached to most cottages, and answer the same purpose ; some have small orchards as well.

The cottagers have also more firewood than

is the case in some arable districts on account of the immense quantity of wood annually cut in copses and double-mound hedges. The rougher part becomes the labourers' perquisite, and they can also purchase wood at a nominal rate from their employers. This more than compensates for the absence of gleaning. In addition, quantities of wood are collected from hedges and ditches and under the trees—dead boughs that have fallen or been broken off by a gale.

The aspect of a grazing district presents a general resemblance to that of a dairy one, with the difference that in the grazing everything seems on a larger scale. Instead of small meadows shut in with hedges and trees, the grazing farms often comprise fields of immense extent; sometimes a single pasture is as large as a small dairy farm. The herds of cattle are also more numerous; of course they are of a different class, but, in mere numbers, a grazier often has three times as many bullocks as a dairy farmer has cows. The mounds are quite as thickly timbered as in dairy districts, but as they are much farther apart, the landscape appears more open.

To a spectator looking down upon mile after mile of such pasture land in summer from an elevation it resembles a park of illimitable extent. Great fields after great fields roll away to the horizon—groups of trees and small copses dot the slopes—roan and black cattle stand in the sheltering shadows. A dreamy haze hangs over the distant woods—all is large, open, noble. It suggests a life of freedom—the gun and the saddle—and, indeed, it is here that hunting is enjoyed in its full perfection. The labourer falls almost out of sight in these vast pastures. The population is sparse and scattered, the hamlets are few and far apart; even many of the farmhouses being only occupied by bailiffs. In comparison with a dairy farm there is little work to do. Cows have to be milked as well as foddered, and the milk when obtained gives employment to many hands in the various processes it goes through. Here the bullocks have simply to be fed and watched, the sheep in like manner have to be tended. Except in the haymaking season, therefore, there is scarcely ever a press for labour. Those who are employed have steady, con-

tinuous work the year through, and are for the most part men of experience in attending upon cattle, as indeed they need be, seeing the value of the herds under their charge.

Although little direct agitation has taken place in pasture countries, yet wages have equally risen. Pasture districts almost drop out of the labour dispute. On the one hand the men are few, on the other the rise of a shilling or so scarcely affects the farmer (so far as his grass land is concerned, if he has much corn as well it is different), because of the small number of labourers he wants.

The great utility of pasture is, of course, the comparatively cheap production of meat, which goes to feed the population in cities. Numbers of bullocks are fattened on corn land in stalls, but of late it has been stated that the cost of feeding under such conditions is so high that scarcely any profit can be obtained. The pasture farmer has by no means escaped without encountering difficulties; but still, with tolerably favourable seasons, he can produce meat much more cheaply than the arable agriculturist. Yet it is one of the avowed objects of the labour

organisation to prevent the increase of pasture land, to stop the laying down of grass, and even to plough up some of the old pastures. The reason given is that corn land supports so many more agricultural labourers, which is so far true ; but if corn farming cannot be carried on profitably without great reduction of the labour expenses the argument is not worth much, while the narrowness of the view is at once evident. The proportion of pasture to arable land must settle itself, and be governed entirely by the same conditions that affect other trades—i.e., profit and loss.

It has already been pointed out that the labourer finds it possible to support the Union with small payments, and also to subscribe to benefit-clubs. The fact suggests the idea that, if facilities were afforded, the labourer would become a considerable depositor of pennies. The Post-office Savings Banks have done much good, the drawback is that the offices are often too distant from the labourer. There is an office in the village, but not half the population live in the village. There are far-away hamlets and tithings, besides lonely groups of three or four farmhouses, to which

a collective name can hardly be given, but which employ a number of men. A rural parish is 'all abroad'—the people are scattered. To go into the Post-office in the village may involve a walk of several miles, and it is closed, too, on Saturday night when the men are flush of money.

The great difficulty with penny banks on the other hand is the receiver—who is to be responsible for the money? The clergyman would be only too glad, but many will have nothing to do with anything under his influence simply because he is the clergyman. The estrangement that has been promoted between the labourer and the tenant farmer effectually shuts the latter out. The landlord's agent cannot reside in fifty places at once. The sums are too small to pay for a bank agent to reside in the village and go round. There remain the men themselves; and why should not they be trusted with the money? Men of their own class collect the Union subscriptions, and faithfully pay them in.

Take the case of a little hamlet two, three, perhaps more miles from a Post-office Savings

Bank, where some thirty labourers work on the farms. Why should not these thirty elect one of their own number to receive their savings every Saturday—to be paid in by him at the Post-office? There are men among them who might be safely trusted with ten times the money, and if the Post-office cannot be opened on Saturday evenings for him to deposit it, it is quite certain that his employer would permit of his absence, on one day, sufficiently long to go to the office and back. If the men wish to be absolutely independent in the matter, all they have to do is to work an extra hour for their agent's employer, and so compensate for his temporary absence. If the men had it in their own hands like this they would enter into it with far greater interest, and it would take root among them. All that is required is the consent of the Post-office to receive moneys so deposited, and some one to broach the idea to the men in the various localities. The great recommendation of the Post-office is that the labouring classes everywhere have come to feel implicit faith in the safety of deposits made in it. They have a confidence in it that can never

be attained by a private enterprise, however benevolent, and it should therefore be utilised to the utmost.

To gentlemen accustomed to receive a regular income, a small lump sum like ten or twenty pounds appears a totally inadequate provision against old age. They institute elaborate calculations by professed accountants, to discover whether by any mode of investment a small subscription proportionate to the labourer's wages can be made to provide him with an annuity. The result is scarcely satisfactory. But, in fact, though an annuity would be, of course, preferable, even so small a sum as ten or twenty pounds is of the very highest value to an aged agricultural labourer, especially when he has a cottage, if not his own property, yet in which he has a right to reside. The neighbouring farmers, who have known him from their own boyhood, are always ready to give him light jobs whenever practicable. So that in tolerable weather he still earns something. His own children do a little for him. In the dead of the winter come a few weeks when he can do nothing, and feels the lack of small comforts. It is just then

that a couple of sovereigns out of a hoard of twenty pounds will tide him over the interval.

It is difficult to convey an idea of the value of these two extra sovereigns to a man of such frugal habits and in that position. None but those who have mixed with the agricultural poor can understand it. Now the wages that will hardly, by the most careful management, allow of the gradual purchase of an annuity, will readily permit such savings as these. It is simply a question of the money-box. When the child's money-box is at hand the penny is dropped in, and the amount accumulates; if there is no box handy it is spent in sweets. The same holds true of young and old alike. If, then, the annuity cannot be arranged, let the money-box, at all events, be brought nearer. And the money-box in which the poor man all over the country has the most faith is the Post-office.

CHAPTER XIII.

HODGE'S LAST MASTERS. CONCLUSION.

AFTER all the ploughing and the sowing, the hoeing and the harvest, comes the miserable end. Strong as the labourer may be, thick-set and capable of immense endurance; by slow degrees that strength must wear away. The limbs totter, the back is bowed, the dimmed sight can no longer guide the plough in a straight furrow, nor the weak hands wield the reaping-hook. Hodge, who, Atlas-like, supported upon his shoulders the agricultural world, comes in his old age under the dominion of his last masters at the workhouse. There, indeed, he finds almost the whole array of his rulers assembled. Tenant farmers sit as the guardians of the poor for their respective parishes; the clergyman and the squire by virtue of their office as magistrates; and the tradesman as guardian for the market town.

Here are representatives of almost all his masters, and it may seem to him a little strange that it should require so many to govern such feeble folk.

The board-room at the workhouse is a large and apparently comfortable apartment. The fire is piled with glowing coals, the red light from which gleams on the polished fender. A vast table occupies the centre, and around it are arranged seats for each of the guardians. The chairman is, perhaps, a clergyman (and magistrate), who for years has maintained something like peace between discordant elements. For the board-room is often a battle-field where political or sectarian animosities exhibit themselves in a rugged way. The clergyman, by force of character, has at all events succeeded in moderating the personal asperity of the contending parties. Many of the stout, elderly farmers who sit round the table have been elected year after year, no one disputing with them that tedious and thankless office. The clerk, always a solicitor, is also present, and his opinion is continually required. Knotty points of law are for ever arising over what seems

so simple a matter as the grant of a dole of bread.

The business, indeed, of relieving the agricultural poor is no light one—a dozen or fifteen gentlemen often sit here the whole day. The routine of examining the relieving officers' books and receiving their reports takes up at least two hours. Agricultural unions often include a wide space of country, and getting from one village to another consumes as much time as would be needed for the actual relief of a much denser population. As a consequence, more relieving officers are employed than would seem at first glance necessary. Each of these has his records to present, and his accounts to be practically audited, a process naturally interspersed with inquiries respecting cottagers known to the guardians present.

Personal applications for out-door relief are then heard. A group of intending applicants has been waiting in the porch for admission for some time. Women come for their daughters; daughters for their mothers; some want assistance during an approaching confinement, others ask for a small loan, to be

repaid by instalments, with which to tide over their difficulties. One cottage woman is occasionally deputed by several of her neighbours as their representative. The labourer or his wife stands before the Board and makes a statement, supplemented by explanation from the relieving officer of the district. Another hour thus passes. Incidentally there arise cases of 'settlement' in distant parishes, when persons have become chargeable whose place of residence was recently, perhaps, half across the country. They have no parochial rights here and must be returned thither, after due inquiries made by the clerk and the exchange of considerable correspondence.

The master of the workhouse is now called in and delivers his weekly report of the conduct of the inmates, and any events that have happened. One inmate, an ancient labourer, died that morning in the infirmary, not many hours before the meeting of the Board. The announcement is received with regretful exclamations, and there is a cessation of business for a few minutes. Some of the old farmers who knew the deceased recount their connection with him, how he

worked for them, and how his family has lived in the parish as cottagers from time immemorial. A reminiscence of a grim joke that fell out forty years before, and of which the deceased was the butt, causes a grave smile, and then to business again. The master possibly asks permission to punish a refractory inmate; punishment is now very sparingly given in the house. A good many cases, however, come up from the Board to the magisterial Bench—charges of tearing up clothing, fighting, damaging property, or of neglecting to maintain, or to repay relief advanced on loan. These cases are, of course, conducted by the clerk.

There is sometimes a report to be read by one of the doctors who receive salaries from the Board and attend to the various districts, and occasionally some nuisance to be considered and order taken for its compulsory removal on sanitary grounds. The question of sanitation is becoming rather a difficult one in agricultural unions.

After this the various committees of the Board have to give in the result of their deliberations, and the representative of the

ladies' boarding-out committee presents a record of the work accomplished. These various committees at times are burdened with the most onerous labours, for upon them falls the duty of verifying all the petty details of management. Every pound of soap, or candles, scrubbing-brushes, and similar domestic items, pass under their inspection, not only the payments for them, but the actual articles, or samples of them, being examined. Tenders for grocery, bread, wines and spirits for cases of illness, meat, coals, and so forth are opened and compared ; vouchers, bills, receipts, invoices, and so forth checked and audited.

The amount of detail thus attended to is something immense, and the accuracy required occupies hour after hour. There are whole libraries of account-books, ledgers, red-bound relief-books, stowed away, pile upon pile, in the house ; archives going back to the opening of the establishment, and from which any trifling relief given or expenditure incurred years ago can be extracted. Such another carefully-administered institution it would be hard to find ; nor is any proposed innovation

or change adopted without the fullest discussion—it may be the suggested erection of additional premises, or the introduction of some fresh feature of the system, or some novel instructions sent down by the Local Government Board.

When such matters or principles are to be discussed there is certain to be a full gathering of the guardians and a trial of strength between the parties. Those who habitually neglect to attend, leaving the hard labour of administration to be borne by their colleagues, now appear in numbers, and the board-room is crowded, many squires otherwise seldom seen coming in to give their votes. It is as much as the chairman can do to assuage the storm and to maintain an approach to personal politeness. Quiet as the country appears to the casual observer, there are, nevertheless, strong feelings under the surface, and at such gatherings the long-cherished animosities burst forth.

Nothing at all events is done in a corner ; everything is openly discussed and investigated. Every week the visiting committee go round the house, and enter every ward and

store-room. They taste and test the provisions, and the least shortcoming is certain to be severely brought home to those who are fulfilling the contracts. They pass through the dormitories, and see that everything is clean ; woe betide those responsible if a spot of dirt be visible ! There is the further check of casual and unexpected visits from the guardians or magistrates. It is probable that not one crumb of bread consumed is otherwise than good, and that not one single crumb is wasted. The waste is in the system—and a gigantic waste it is, whether inevitable as some contend, or capable of being superseded by a different plan.

Of every hundred pounds paid by the rate-payers how much is absorbed in the maintenance of the institution and its ramifications, and how very little reaches poor deserving Hodge ! The undeserving and mean-spirited, of whom there are plenty in every village, who endeavour to live upon the parish, receive relief thrice as long and to thrice the amount as the hard-working, honest labourer, who keeps out to the very last moment. It is not the fault of the guardians, but of the rigidity

of the law. Surely a larger amount of discretionary power might be vested in them with advantage! Some exceptional consideration is the just due of men who have worked from the morn to the very eve of life.

The labourer whose decease was reported to the Board upon their assembling was born some seventy-eight or seventy-nine years ago. The exact date is uncertain; many of the old men can only fix their age by events that happened when they were growing from boys into manhood. That it must have been nearer eighty than seventy years since is known, however, to the elderly farmers, who recollect him as a man with a family when they were young. The thatched cottage stood beside the road at one end of a long narrow garden, enclosed from the highway by a hedge of elder. At the back there was a ditch and mound with elm-trees, and green meadows beyond. A few poles used to lean against the thatch, their tops rising above the ridge, and close by was a stack of thorn faggots. In the garden three or four aged and mossgrown apple-trees stood among the little plots of potatoes, and as many plum-trees in the elder

hedge. One tall pear-tree with scored bark grew near the end of the cottage ; it bore a large crop of pears, which were often admired by the people who came along the road, but were really hard and woody. As a child he played in the ditch and hedge, or crept through into the meadow and searched in the spring for violets to offer to the passers-by ; or he swung on the gate in the lane and held it open for the farmers in their gigs, in hope of a half-penny.

As a lad he went forth with his father to work in the fields, and came home to the cabbage boiled for the evening meal. It was not a very roomy or commodious home to return to after so many hours in the field, exposed to rain and wind, to snow, or summer sun. The stones of the floor were uneven, and did not fit at the edges. There was a beam across the low ceiling, to avoid which, as he grew older, he had to bow his head when crossing the apartment. A wooden ladder, or steps, not a staircase proper, behind the white-washed partition, led to the bed-room. The steps were worm-eaten and worn. In the sitting-room the narrow panes of the small window were

so overgrown with woodbine as to admit but little light. But in summer the door was wide open, and the light and the soft air came in. The thick walls and thatch kept it warm and cosy in winter, when they gathered round the fire. Every day in his manhood he went out to the field; every item, as it were, of life centred in that little cottage. In time he came to occupy it with his own wife, and his children in their turn crept through the hedge, or swung upon the gate. They grew up, and one by one went away, till at last he was left alone.

He had not taken much conscious note of the changing aspect of the scene around him. The violets flowered year after year; still he went to plough. The May bloomed and scented the hedges; still he went to his work. The green summer foliage became brown and the acorns fell from the oaks; still he laboured on, and saw the ice and snow, and heard the wind roar in the old familiar trees without much thought of it. But those old familiar trees, the particular hedges he had worked among so many years, the very turf of the meadows over which he had walked so many

times, the view down the road from the garden gate, the distant sign-post and the red-bricked farmhouse—all these things had become part of his life. There was no hope nor joy left to him, but he wanted to stay on among them to the end. He liked to ridge up his little plot of potatoes; he liked to creep up his ladder and mend the thatch of his cottage; he liked to cut himself a cabbage, and to gather the one small basketful of apples. There was a kind of dull pleasure in cropping the elder hedge, and even in collecting the dead branches scattered under the trees. To be about the hedges, in the meadows, and along the brooks was necessary to him, and he liked to be at work.

Three score and ten did not seem the limit of his working days; he still could and would hoe—a bowed back is no impediment, but perhaps rather an advantage, at that occupation. He could use a prong in the haymaking; he could reap a little, and do good service tying up the cut corn. There were many little jobs on the farm that required experience, combined with the plodding patience of age, and these he could do better than a stronger man. The

years went round again, and yet he worked. Indeed, the farther back a man's birth dates in the beginning of the present century the more he seems determined to labour. He worked on till every member of his family had gone, most to their last home, and still went out at times when the weather was not too severe. He worked on, and pottered round the garden, and watched the young green plums swelling on his trees, and did a bit of gleaning, and thought the wheat would weigh bad when it was threshed out.

Presently people began to bestir themselves, and to ask whether there was no one to take care of the old man, who might die from age and none near. Where were his own friends and relations? One strong son had enlisted and gone to India, and though his time had expired long ago, nothing had ever been heard of him. Another son had emigrated to Australia, and once sent back a present of money, and a message, written for him by a friend, that he was doing well. But of late he, too, had dropped out of sight. Of three daughters who grew up, two were known to be dead, and the third was believed to be in

New Zealand. The old man was quite alone. He had no hope and no joy, yet he was almost happy in a slow unfeeling way wandering about the garden and the cottage. But in the winter his half-frozen blood refused to circulate, his sinews would not move his willing limbs, and he could not work.

His case came before the Board of Guardians. Those who knew all about him wished to give him substantial relief in his own cottage, and to appoint some aged woman as nurse—a thing that is occasionally done, and most humanely. But there were technical difficulties in the way; the cottage was either his own or partly his own, and relief could not be given to any one possessed of ‘property.’ Just then, too, there was a great movement against out-door relief: official circulars came round warning Boards to curtail it, and much fuss was made. In the result the old man was driven into the workhouse; muttering and grumbling, he had to be bodily carried to the trap, and thus by physical force was dragged from his home. In the workhouse there is of necessity a dead level of monotony—there are many persons but

no individuals. The dining-hall is crossed with forms and narrow tables, somewhat resembling those formerly used in schools. On these at dinner-time are placed a tin mug and a tin soup-plate for each person : every mug and every plate exactly alike. When the unfortunates have taken their places, the master pronounces grace from an elevated desk at the end of the hall.

Plain as is the fare, it was better than the old man had existed on for years ; but though better it was not his dinner. He was not sitting in his old chair, at his own old table, round which his children had once gathered. He had not planted the cabbage, and tended it while it grew, and cut it himself. So it was, all through the workhouse life. The dormitories were clean, but the ward was not his old bedroom up the worm-eaten steps, with the slanting ceiling, where as he woke in the morning he could hear the sparrows chirping, the chaffinch calling, and the lark singing aloft. There was a garden attached to the workhouse, where he could do a little if he liked, but it was not his garden. He missed his plum-trees and apples, and the tall pear,

and the lowly elder hedge. He looked round raising his head with difficulty, and he could not see the sign-post, nor the familiar red-bricked farmhouse. He knew all the rain that had fallen must have come through the thatch of the old cottage in at least one place, and he would have liked to have gone and re-thatched it with trembling hand. At home he could lift the latch of the garden gate and go down the road when he wished. Here he could not go outside the boundary—it was against the regulations. Everything to appearance had been monotonous in the cottage—but there he did not feel it monotonous.

At the workhouse the monotony weighed upon him. He used to think as he lay awake in bed that when the spring came nothing should keep him in this place. He would take his discharge and go out, and borrow a hoe from somebody, and go and do a bit of work again, and be about in the fields. That was his one hope all through his first winter. Nothing else enlivened it, except an occasional little present of tobacco from the guardians who knew him. The spring came, but the rain was ceaseless. No work of the kind he

could do was possible in such weather. Still there was the summer, but the summer was no improvement ; in the autumn he felt weak, and was not able to walk far. The chance for which he had waited had gone. Again the winter came, and he now rapidly grew more feeble.

When once an aged man gives up, it seems strange at first that he should be so utterly helpless. In the infirmary the real benefit of the workhouse reached him. The food, the little luxuries, the attention were far superior to anything he could possibly have had at home. But still it was not home. The windows did not permit him from his bed to see the leafless trees or the dark woods and distant hills. Left to himself, it is certain that of choice he would have crawled under a rick, or into a hedge, if he could not have reached his cottage.

The end came very slowly ; he ceased to exist by imperceptible degrees, like an oak-tree. He remained for days in a semi-unconscious state, neither moving nor speaking. It happened at last. In the grey of the winter dawn, as the stars paled and the

whitened grass was stiff with hoar frost, and the rime coated every branch of the tall elms, as the milker came from the pen and the young ploughboy whistled down the road to his work, the spirit of the aged man departed.

What amount of production did that old man's life of labour represent? What value must be put upon the service of the son that fought in India; of the son that worked in Australia; of the daughter in New Zealand, whose children will help to build up a new nation? These things surely have their value. Hodge died, and the very gravedigger grumbled as he delved through the earth hard-bound in the iron frost, for it jarred his hand and might break his spade. The low mound will soon be level, and the place of his burial shall not be known.

THE END.

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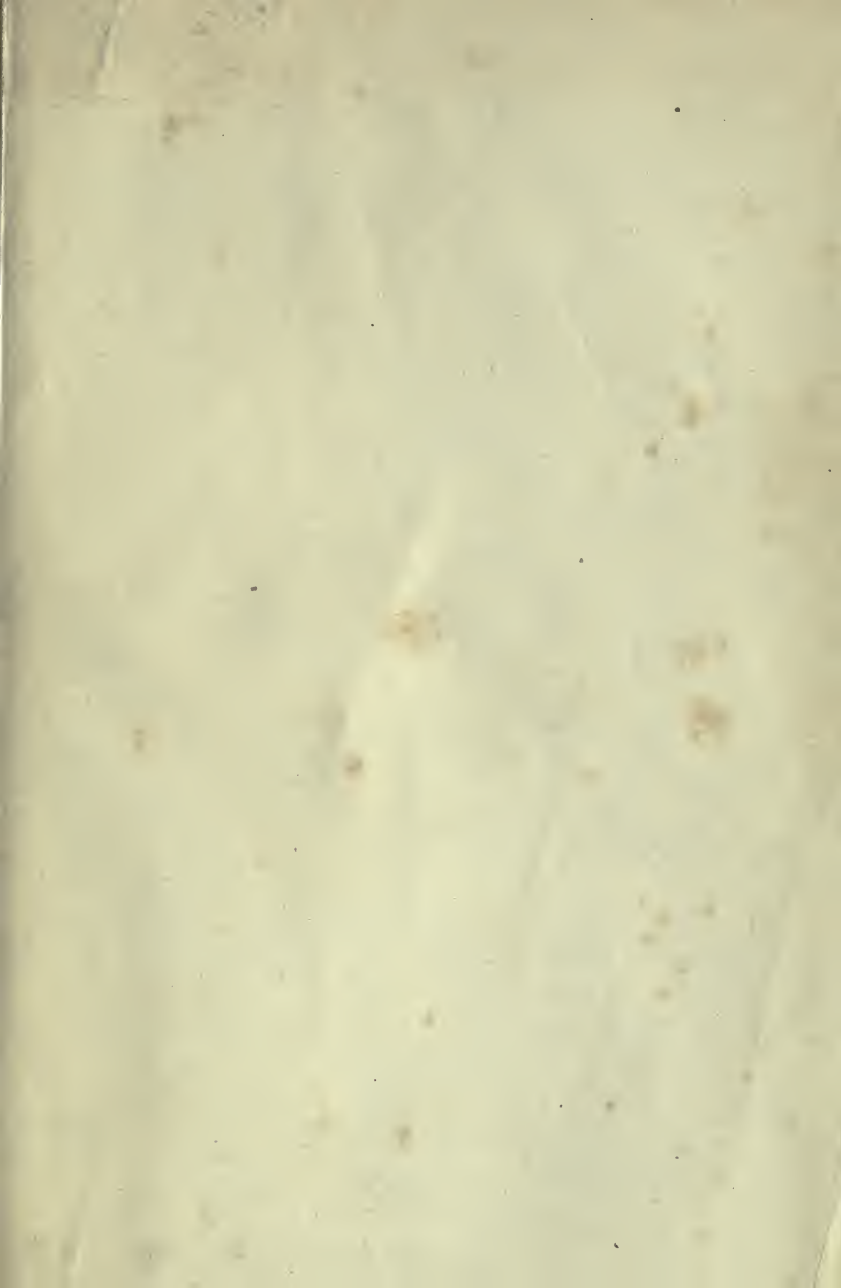
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